The New Criterion

March 2001

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The New Criterion *March 2001*

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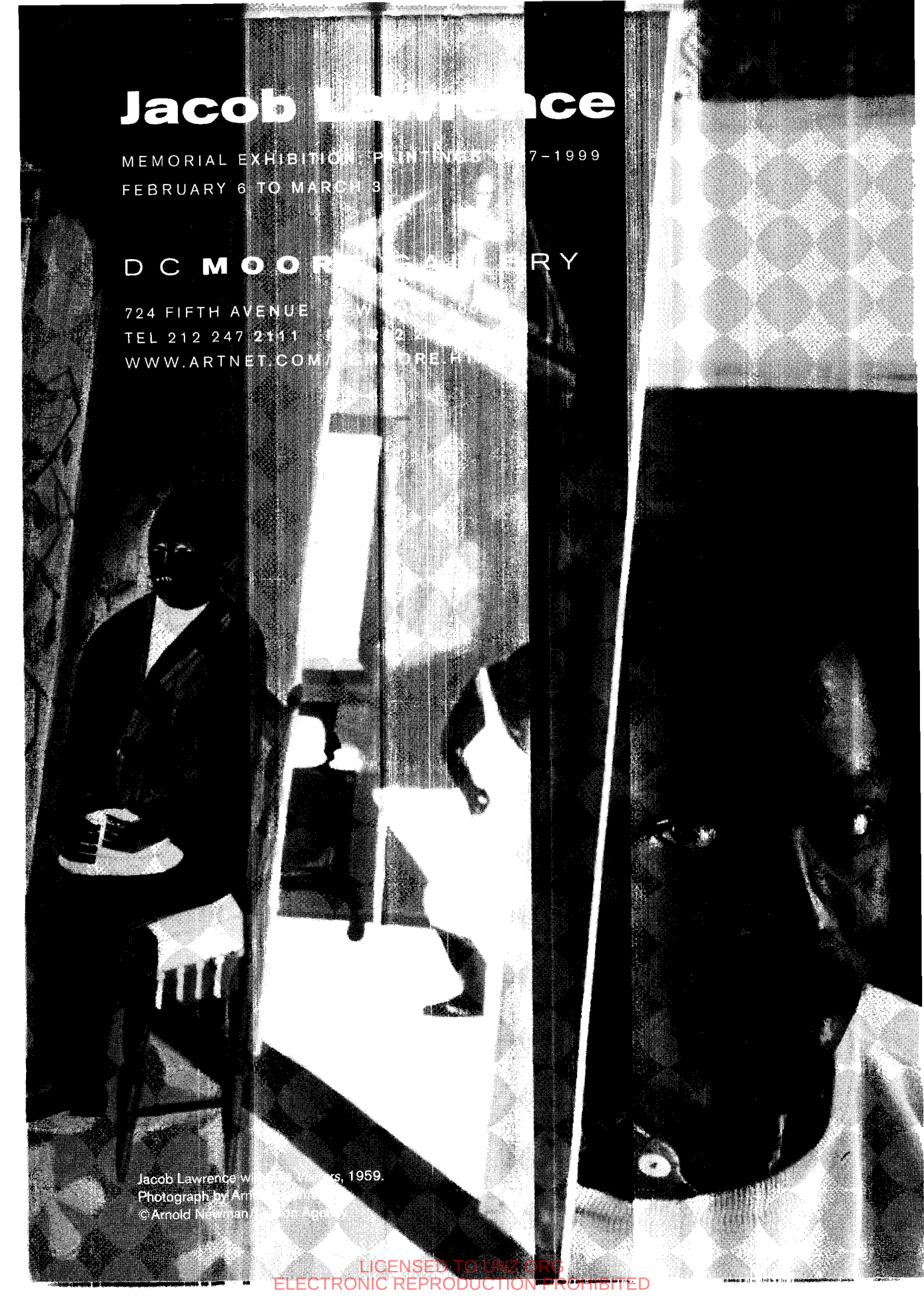

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Notes & Comments: March 2001

The tendency of our culture

By the time the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee died in 1975, he was world famous. His multivolume magnum opus, *A Study of History* (which began appearing in the mid-1930s), had secured his place as an intellectual celebrity—part sage, part scholar. Purporting to demonstrate how civilizations begin, develop, and, inevitably, disintegrate, *A Study of History* is a curious mixture of recondite learning and moral admonition. Bold, lofty, adventurous, it is an immensely ambitious book. It is also, in many respects, an immensely silly one. In this it resembles its author. For Toynbee, history had the structure of a Greek tragedy. It was the story of Hubris ineluctably calling forth ἄτη —infatuation, blindness, delusion—which was followed in turn by Nemesis and ruination. This story has a certain poetic appeal. What it has to do with real history is another matter.

Toynbee epitomized a certain type of modern anti-secular, left-wing intellectual. The product of an elite English education —Winchester and Oxford—he harbored a special loathing for the social and political institutions of the West. In the 1950s he assured his readers that "Western imperialism, not Russian Communism, is Enemy no. 1 for the majority of the human race." A decade latter he observed that "Madison Avenue is more of a danger to the West than Communism." If Toynbee was at various points in his career well-disposed to Communism, he felt no compunction about ignoring its fundamental hostility to religion. Whatever Toynbee's personal ambivalence to religion, *A Study in History* sits in a veritable aspic of religious sentimentality. Indeed, that glaze of religiosity doubtless helps explain the book's extraordinary popularity. Toynbee caters to all those who like their spirituality plush but indeterminate, ubiquitous but without the inconvenience of specific beliefs. For Toynbee, Nirvana and the beatific vision describe more or less the same thing; in his view, "every higher religion" aspires to the misty vagueness of "the universal church."

Toynbee's syncretism only went so far, however. His defenders deny he was anti-Semitic. But as Elie Kedourie pointed out, Toynbee did not hesitate to describe the Jews as a "fossil" civilization or, in 1948, to equate the Palestinian Jews, battling to establish the state of Israel, with the Nazis. When he finally got around to reconsidering his position on Judaism, it was in the context of celebrating the idea of world government and insisting that the Jews lead the way in demonstrating to mankind the folly of capitalism, nationalism, and territorial attachment. (Perhaps it was to en-

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courage such leadership that, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in 1973, Toynbee wrote the Syrian minister of defense to convey his "heartfelt wishes for an Arab victory.")

We air these reservations to provide a context for the praise we feel is due, not to Toynbee's work, exactly, but to the use made of it recently by the social commentator Charles Murray. In "Prole Models," a remarkable op-ed piece for *The Wall Street Journal* that appeared on February 6, Mr. Murray drew on some of Toynbee's thoughts about how civilizations disintegrate to reflect on the situation in the United States circa 2001. Toynbee was never happy unless he was dealing with a pattern he believed fit two or three millennia. That is part of what gives his writing such sweep. It is also one reason to take his prognostications with a grain of salt: a history that finds the same plot recapitulated in ancient China, classical Greece, the Roman Empire, and modern Europe and America is a story in need of nuance, qualification, and correction.

Nevertheless, whatever hesitations we may have about Toynbee's theory writ large, there can be no doubt that he had many perceptive and illuminating things to say about some of the forces operating in our civilization. Mr. Murray's reflections have to do in particular with Toynbee's observations, in a section called the "Schism in the Soul," about how the dominant elite in a society succumbs to "vulgarity and barbarism in manners" by "merging itself in its own proletariats." Toynbee distinguished between "internal proletariats"—what we might call the underclass—and "external proletariats," by which he meant culturally less sophisticated military rivals.

It is a curious process. When a society is robust and self-confident, Toynbee suggested, the influence travels largely from the elites to the proletariats. The proletariats are "softened" (in Toynbee's phrase) by their imitation of the manners and morals of a dominant elite. But when a society begins to falter, the imitation proceeds largely in the opposite direction: the dominant elite is coarsened by its imitation of proletarian manners: Toynbee spoke in this context of a growing "sense of drift," "truancy," "promiscuity," and general "vulgarization" of manners, morals, and the arts. The elites, instead of holding fast to their own standards, suddenly begin to "go native" and adopt the dress, attitudes, and behavior of the lower classes. As Mr. Murray notes, "That sounds very much like what has been happening in the U.S."

> Truancy and promiscuity, in Toynbee's sense, are not new in America. But until a few decades ago they were publicly despised and largely confined to the bottom layer of Toynbee's proletariat—the group we used to call "low-class" or "trash," and which we now call the underclass. Today, those behaviors have been transmuted into a code that the elites *sometimes imitate, sometimes placate,* and fear to challenge. Meanwhile, they no longer have a code of their own in which they have confidence.

As for examples, they are not far to seek. Consider the acceptance, in what used to be called "polite society," of obscene language. It is not just that four-letter words are now an accepted fixture in conversation; they are also increasingly accepted in mainstream publications, radio shows, and television programs. That change of standards about what is and what isn't appropriate in linguistic manners is more than a fashion statement: it is a token of spiritual disintegration. And it is, as Mr. Murray notes, hardly an isolated symptom. The litany is as familar as it is depressing.

> The hooker look in fashion, tattoos, and body piercing is the obvious evidence [we might also mention the recent phenomenon of "her-

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> oin chic"], although Toynbee would probably see as much significance in wearing jeans to church. I find the intriguing element here to be the respectfulness extended toward underclass appearance. No one in the public eye calls any kind of dress "cheap" or "sleazy" any more.
>
> Sexual behavior? As late as 1960, sleeping with one's boyfriend was still a lower-class thing to do. Except in a few sophisticated circles, a woman of the elites did it furtively, and usually with the person she expected to marry. Behavior that is now considered absolutely normal was considered sluttish in 1960.
>
> Family? The divorce rate in 1960 was only a notch higher than it had been in the first recorded figures from 1920. It happened among members of the dominant minority, but rarely and with extreme reluctance. As for living together without being married and having babies without marrying the father, language alone conveys their change in status over the years. People used to shack up; now they cohabit. The woman used to have a bastard, then an illegitimate child; now she has a nonmarital birth.
>
> Language, appearance, sex, and family: Each of the signs by which we used to recognize a member of the underclass fails today. But the proletarianization of the dominant minority has broader implications than changes in social norms. What we are witnessing is the aftermath of a collapse of the code of the elites, creating a vacuum in which underclass behavior takes on the elements of a code.

Of course, as Mr. Murray hastens to add, the process of proletarianization is not monolithic. There are plenty of exceptions, challenges, reversals, and reconsiderations of the development that Toynbee described. But there is an important sense in which such qualifications are beside the point. What we are talking about is the drift, the tendency of our culture. And that is to be measured not so much by what we permit or forbid as by what we unthinkingly accept as normal. "If the question is whether America's elites are being proletarianized," Mr. Murray observes,

> the answer is found by identifying the things that are no longer taken for granted. It may be a positive sign that important voices have again begun to talk about virtue, but the salient fact is that they must start by defending the proposition that virtue and vice are valid concepts. Important voices are talking about the coarsening of American life, but the salient fact is that they can no longer appeal to a common understanding of vulgarity and a common contempt for the vulgar. In these senses, the elites have already been proletarianized, and only remnants protest.

In the end, what we are talking about is the fate of a way of life that is also a way of looking at the world. The memory still lingers for which "virtue" and "vice" are not abstractions but living realities, for which mannerly behavior in speech and action is a token of self-respect as well as respect for others, for which terms like "honor" and "justice," "manliness" and "womanliness," "duty" and "respectability" can be used without irony or scare quotes. There are still individuals and institutions in our culture for which high standards of behavior and accomplishment enjoy the presumption of deference. The question is whether such individuals and institutions are social dinosaurs, awaiting the calamity that will seal their extinction, or whether they are harbingers of galvanizing new energies. Like Mr. Murray, we are saddened by much that we see happening in our culture. And we agree with his concluding observation that "Bill Clinton's presidency, in both its conduct and in the reactions to that conduct, was a paradigmatic example of elites that have been infected by 'the sickness of proletarianization.'" But no one—not Mr. Murray, not Arnold Toynbee—knows enough to plot the course of history. The swamp through which we trudge today may give way to darker, more mephitic ponds. It may lead on to golden pastures. The only thing foreordained is that no conclusion is certain. Which is to say that our loss is measured chiefly by our acquiesence. Today's "remnants" may well be tomorrow's vanguard.

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Sanctimony serving politics: the Florida fiasco

by Robert H. Bork

A great deal more than the name of the new president was at stake in *Bush* v. *Gore*. As columnist Tony Blankley wrote in *The Washington Times* on November 11,

> [W]hat is sticking in the craw this time is the brazen, slick, daylight heisting of the votes. . . . In this regard, Mr. Gore has learned from Mr. Clinton that when he violates the nation's values in front of the public—staring us down, daring us to do something about it—our failure to defend ourselves morally weakens us for the next time. And there will always be a next time.

In that sense, the Supreme Court, at considerable cost to itself, saved us, at least momentarily, from a further precipitous decline in our public morality.

Few events illustrate so starkly the debased state of America's political and legal culture as did Vice President Gore's frenzied attempts to overturn Governor Bush's narrow victory in the Florida presidential election. Almost no one and no institution emerged unscathed from the toxic mixture of unrestrained personal ambition and liberal ideology that forced the contest to ultimate resolution in the United States Supreme Court. Yet the lessons of that unseemly brawl have been obscured by the welter of recriminations, celebrations, and invincibly ignorant punditry that have followed.

The battle for Florida's twenty-five electoral votes, and hence for the presidency, involved so many lawsuits on different theories in both state and federal courts, as well as the possibilities of action by the Florida legislature and Congress, that it was impossible for a time to calculate all the possible outcomes of the chaos. Only in retrospect did the story line become clear.

As the entire world now knows, the disputed Florida votes were cast by punching out a chad opposite the preferred candidate's name. The votes, cast on November 7 and counted by machine, gave Bush the victory and, it seemed, the presidency. The closeness of the contest automatically triggered a machine recount, which confirmed the outcome, albeit by a narrower margin. Gore then sought a manual recount of all "undervotes" (ballots on which the machines had detected no vote for president) in four heavily Democratic counties. Florida's secretary of state, to whom the returns were to be made, refused to waive the November 14 statutory deadline, however, which left too little time for the recount and the inevitable challenges in court. But the Florida Supreme Court, composed of six Democrats and one independent, acting on its own motion, enjoined the certification of the vote. Citing the necessity of determining the "will of the people" (a phrase with ominous associations) and the need not to be deterred by a "hypertechnical reliance upon statutory provisions," the unanimous court ordered that the recount proceed to

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find the "intent" of the unknown persons who had not fully dislodged the chads on their ballots. Purporting to exercise its "equitable powers," the court extended the deadline to November 26, a date unrelated to any statute and apparently chosen simply to help Gore.

The U.S. Supreme Court, to the surprise of almost all court-watchers, took the case, unanimously stayed the recount, and remanded the case to the Florida court for clarification of the basis for its decision. Now divided four to three, the Florida court reinstated the November 26 deadline and held that all Florida counties must be recounted. Yet the court also said that votes counted after November 26 could be included, thus, in defiance of Florida law and its own opinion, creating a flexible "deadline" to give Gore the maximum opportunity to win. The shamelessness of this performance practically forced the U.S. Supreme Court to accept Bush's appeal. In an opinion issued on December 12, the court fractured. Five justices held that the deadline was that same day, that the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was violated by the disparate standards used by the recounters to determine the "intent" underlying each ballot, found the time (which amounted to a few hours) too short to conduct a proper recount, and ordered the process stopped. Two justices agreed to the equal protection ruling but thought the deadline was December 18, when the electors were to meet, and would have allowed the state the extra six days to attempt the surely impossible task of adopting adequate standards, completing a recount in all counties, and deciding all court challenges. Two justices would simply have affirmed the Florida court. Though the decision appears to be five to four, seven justices agreed that a violation of equal protection was in progress and, since a valid recount could not have been completed even by December 18, Bush had, in practical effect, won seven to two.

The conclusion that the Equal Protection Clause had been violated raises serious difficulties, however. At first glance, it seems hard to deny that an essentially standardless process by which some votes are valid and other, identical, votes are not raises equal protection problems. Some recounters considered only partially detached chads a vote while others settled for a dent or a crease, and these differences occurred not only from county to county but also within counties and between recounters. But these and similar disparities have always existed within states under our semi-chaotic election processes. By raising that to the level of a constitutional violation, the court federalized state election laws. The opportunities for uncertainty, litigation, and delay in close elections seem endless, which is probably why federal courts have never entered this particular briar patch before. Once the Equal Protection Clause is unleashed, it will apply to every federal, state, and local election in the country. Ironically, several justices known for their concern about the independence of states struck a blow against federalism.

Three justices—Rehnquist, Scalia, and Thomas—offered a better rationale in their concurring opinion. They relied on Article II, Section 1, Clause 2 of the Constitution, which provides that "Each State shall appoint, in such manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors" and on Section 5 of Title 3 of the United States Code which requires that the laws governing an election must be made beforehand. The Florida court violated these requirements by changing after the election both the final date for certification and the responsibilities of the various state agencies as the legislature had defined them. Counsel for Gore was put in the untenable position at oral argument of contending that the Florida court could make post-election changes in the law that the legislature could not. Had two of the other four justices who relied upon equal protection gone along with this analysis, the decision would have been sounder and much future difficulty avoided. Article II and Section 5 of Title 3

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speak only to presidential elections and do not rule out every difference in election procedures within a state. But that rationale did not command a majority, perhaps because the other four justices found the familiar rhetoric of equal protection more comfortable.

So fraught with complications and dangers is the court's equal protection rationale that some commentators have expressed the hope that it will prove to be like a railroad ticket good for this day and train only. If so, that would merely reveal the inadequacy of the original ruling, and, in any event, courts are not supposed to issue decisions that cannot be shown to be aspects of more general principles. But the hope of inconsistency is probably forlorn anyway. If the Supreme Court intends to back away from equal protection in future election cases, that fact will not be known in advance to lower court judges who may proceed to federalize state election laws as the seven justices in *Bush* v. *Gore* suggest they should. In order to stop that trend, the court may have to shift to the different ground offered in the concurring opinion. That said, it must be remembered, in extenuation, that the justices were working under tremendous pressure of time and public scrutiny. It is no easy thing to hammer out a legal brief in one or two days, and the task is made almost impossible if several law firms are involved. The justices, each with four clerks, operate as nine separate law firms. Herding cats isn't even in it.

Though the majority has been criticized for setting the cutoff date on the twelfth rather than the eighteenth of December, that seems a minor sin given the fact that neither date could realistically have been met. We are entitled to speculate that, with good reason, the majority so distrusted the recount process in Florida and the state's courts that it seemed better to end the matter on the twelfth rather than put the country and the court through six more days of legal chicanery and useless turmoil.

Cruder commentators, with which the print and electronic media and law school faculties are amply supplied, put the decision down to raw political partisanship. But the idea that each of the seven justices who found a constitutional violation and the five who voted to end the recounts immediately were voting for a Bush presidency is a bit too crass to be credited, particularly if you know the people involved.

The more likely explanation is that the justices saw an election being stolen in Florida and that the Supreme Court of Florida was not only complicit but also willing to defy the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet the court majority could not agree on a valid constitutional doctrine to remedy an incipient constitutional crisis. The justices could hardly admit that they shared Justice Stevens's version of the Bush position:

> What must underlie the petitioners' entire federal assault on the Florida election procedures is an unstated lack of confidence in the impartiality and capacity of the state judges who would make the critical decisions if the vote were to proceed.

Stevens was arguing that the court had no right to entertain such misgivings. But there were excellent reasons to do just that. One might add that there was a justified lack of confidence in those who would do the actual recounting. Canvassing boards regularly split two to one along party lines in finding valid votes for Gore. Once the boards decided that a dimple or a crease on a chad could indicate a voter's intent, an impossibly subjective element was introduced. (A crease may be created, of course, by the thumbnail of the recounter.) Scalia noted, moreover, that it was "generally agreed that each manual recount produces a degradation of the ballots, which renders a subsequent recount inaccurate."

The court's choice was between an inadequate majority opinion and permitting the stealing of a presidential election. It does not help a great deal to say, as some have, that the court's performance was statesmanlike. That is an excellent quality in other

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branches of government but it is not a primary aspect of judicial virtue. Adherence to law is. It is just as well, therefore, that there is a valid rationale for what the majority did even if only three justices subscribed to it. The defiance shown by the Florida Supreme Court coupled with the obvious purpose of the repeated recounts of selected counties to produce a victory for Al Gore cried out for someone or some institution to save the integrity of the electoral process. That the U.S. Supreme Court did.

The majority opinion raises a further question: whether a desirable result can ever be an adequate reason for law-bending. That seems to depend on one's political sympathy. The question lay at the heart of the court's ruling in *United States* v. *Nixon* requiring the president to comply with the special prosecutor's subpoena of White House tapes. Strictly speaking, the case was not justiciable, for it involved a dispute between the head of the executive branch and a subordinate officer. Such disputes can be resolved definitively by an order from the president to the subordinate, which means that there is not the "case" or "controversy" that Article III of the Constitution requires for the exercise of judicial power. James St. Clair, Mr. Nixon's attorney, tried to make that argument to the Supreme Court but Justice Potter Stewart responded that in the ordinary case that would be true, but here the president, through the acting attorney general, me, had given the prosecutor a charter that guaranteed his right to go to court. That was not, of course, a complete answer. The case would not have been different if a president gave a charter to the secretary of defense promising not to interfere in military decisions and then sued to make a reluctant secretary order the invasion of Grenada. No court, in the ordinary course, would have entertained that suit since, charter or no, the president has the constitutional power as commander in chief to control the military. The issue would be as nonjusticiable a question as can be imagined. St. Clair, however, did not respond to the charter argument, and the court relied upon it in deciding the case against Nixon.

The court was, however, under enormous "hydraulic pressure." The Watergate scandal had reached the highest pitch of public emotion, and it was unthinkable to the public that the court would refuse to decide; the general outrage that there seemed to be no way to get the (expected) incriminating evidence from the White House, that the Watergate controversy was unresolvable, was more than the court could be expected to bear. So it was with the ongoing subversion of the presidential election in the seemingly endless demand for selective recounts in Florida. With a difference: when, jurisdiction or no jurisdiction, the tapes case went against Nixon, there was no suggestion by liberals, and little enough by anybody else, that the decision was illegitimate. Instead, there was general satisfaction. But when a decision that may be criticized goes against a Democrat, as this one did against Gore, there is widespread denunciation of the court as having behaved politically.

It is possible to be at once critical of the majority's legal performance in *Bush* v. *Gore* and yet recognize that such performances are inevitable, or at least almost irresistible, when the pressure is high enough. Very few people today are critical of the court's 1803 decision in *Marbury* v. *Madison*, though this first broad assertion of the power of judicial review came in a case over which the Supreme Court had no jurisdiction and which required the wilful misconstruction of a congressional statute in order to gin up a bogus constitutional issue. John Marshall was combating the centrifugal force of the Jeffersonians, who held the presidency and a congressional majority and who sought to weaken the national government so that the United States would once more resemble a confederacy rather than a unified nation. That may not be an adequate justification, but the case is now regarded as sacred writ.

Some of the fiercest attacks upon the *Bush* v. *Gore* majority came from within the

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court. Justice Stevens announced that the "loser" is "the nation's confidence" in the judiciary "as an impartial guardian of the rule of law." The judiciary, and in particular the court upon which Stevens sits, has not been an impartial guardian of, or even particularly interested in, the rule of law. Stevens is himself a leader of the most political wing of the court, regularly finding policies in the Constitution that are really only items on the liberal agenda for the nation.

Public comments on the case, some of them thoughtful, more of them intemperate, virtually all missed the point that there was a solid rationale for the decision even though only three Justices articulated it. Stuart Taylor, Jr., one of the more thoughtful commentators, said in *National Journal* on December 16 that

> the U.S. and Florida Supreme Courts have done very little to make the law respectable. If this cloud has a silver lining, it comes as a reminder to a court-worshipping nation that judges are as fallible (and sometimes as political) as politicians.

Aside from the fact that the nation is very likely to go on worshipping courts, what, exactly, could the nation do if it got over its worshipping ways? The courts might modify their adventurism somewhat if public opinion turned decisively against them, but that is unlikely. Too many influential groups—law school and university faculties, print and electronic journalists, Hollywood, all of our faux intelligentsia—support and encourage the court's political role because it usually results in the political results they like.

Taylor also holds out a hope that seems to me forlorn:

> [F]orceful criticism of unstatesmanlike decisions such as this one—and of the Florida court's hubristic, judicial imperialism—is a vital antidote to the tendency of judges of all political stripes to aggrandize their own power. Indeed, if judges cannot be persuaded to restrain themselves, they risk a dangerous and destabilizing popular backlash.

It is unclear what would be dangerous and destabilizing about a popular backlash against judges who undertake to rule without a warrant. The questions to be asked are whether the courts are not now themselves a dangerous and destabilizing force in our polity and whether a popular backlash could produce a result worse than the continuing displacement of popular self-government by judges. Indeed, it is not at all clear what a backlash could accomplish. We are hardly likely to deprive courts of their power of judicial review. Perhaps for that reason, repeated warnings of an effective backlash have never been borne out.

During the era of the Warren Court, the contempt for law and the desire to make major policy were so blatant that even the court's supporters repeatedly warned that results reached with so little respect for craftsmanship and candor made the court vulnerable. We have learned that those failings, however egregious, have not lessened the power of the court to do want it wants. There is, unfortunately, no particular reason to believe that will change. Indeed, Earl Warren, the exemplar of lawless judges, is now celebrated as a great and humane jurist.

The New York Times reporter Linda Greenhouse, who has covered the court for years, cautions that the need for the court to explain its actions in terms the public can understand and accept "is arguably greater than ever when the court can be perceived as stepping over the fine but nonetheless still distinct line that separates law and politics." "Beyond debate" she said, "is the fact that the court has now placed itself in the midst of a political thicket where it has always most doubted its institutional competence and where as a personal matter the justices have always appeared least comfortable." That would be a remarkably obtuse observation for any observer of the court's adventures. But it is a particularly astound-

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ing admonition coming from a woman who marched in pro-abortion demonstrations to the Supreme Court to support abortion and *Roe* v. *Wade*. She should have no illusions about the political thicket the court long ago entered, with her enthusiastic approval.

The most strident attacks on the court's performance, however, came from Jeffrey Rosen of *The New Republic* and the lawyer-novelist Scott Turow. In an article with the title "Disgrace: The Supreme Court commits suicide," Rosen wrote that the five justices in the majority have "made it impossible for citizens of the United States to sustain any kind of faith in the rule of law as something larger than the self-interested political preferences" of the five. "We've had," Mr. Rosen informs us, "quite enough of judicial saviors." He thinks "The appropriate response [to *Bush* v. *Gore*] is to appoint genuinely restrained judges, in the model of Ginsburg and Breyer, who will use their power cautiously, if at all, and will dismantle the federal judiciary's imperious usurpation of American democracy." That sentence produces intellectual whiplash. Ginsburg? Breyer? Those are two of the four activist liberal judges on the court. They regularly ignore the Constitution as those who wrote and ratified it understood its principles, substituting instead their own extremely liberal social and cultural preferences. Justice Ginsburg wrote *U.S.* v. *Virginia et al.*, suddenly finding that after a century and a quarter of peaceful coexistence, the Fourteenth Amendment and the maintenance of the Virginia Military Institute as all-male were in irreconcilable conflict. Justice Breyer, as the junior member of the court, has been assigned few major opinions but has joined, with Justice Ginsburg, in cases such as *VMI*, *Romer* v. *Evans*—creating special voting rights for homosexuals—*Stenberg* v. *Carhart*—striking down a ban on partial birth abortions—and *Santa Fe School District* v. *Doe*—holding unconstitutional student elections permitting speech that might be used for prayer prior to high school football games. Sadly for Mr. Rosen's panegyric to the judicial left, the only justices who in any way resemble, though in different degrees, a restrained judiciary are the very justices he denounces as lawless.

Turow wrote in *The Washington Post* that the court's decision "to stay the hand count of undervote ballots was the most overtly politicized action by a court that I have seen in 22 years of practicing law. It was an act of judicial lawlessness that effectively terminated Gore's chance to win the presidency." The prize for sanctimony in the service of politics, however, must be awarded jointly to the 554 law professors whose full-page ad in *The New York Times*, paid for by the left-wing People for the American Way Foundation, declared that

> By stopping the vote count in Florida, the U.S. Supreme Court used its power to act as political partisans, not judges of a court of law. . . . By taking power from the voters, the Supreme Court has tarnished its own legitimacy. As teachers whose lives have been dedicated to the rule of law, we protest.

The insufferable smugness of this statement is difficult to top. It is to be doubted, given the notorious politicization of the nation's law schools, that there are anything close to five-hundred professors whose lives are dedicated to the rule of law. There are many times that number, including many who signed the ad, whose professional careers have been devoted to seeing that the rule of law does not hamper judicial advancement of the liberal agenda.

Even more extreme and shrill was Alan Dershowitz's labelling the Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris a "crook" aiding and abetting the Bush campaign. Character assassination is merely part of the ultra-liberal repertoire. More dangerous was Jesse Jackson's and the congressional Black Caucus's claims that Bush's victory had been won by fraud, intimidation of black voters, a partisan Republican Supreme Court, and that racism infected the whole process. This added racial tension to an already emotionally charged controversy and could only in-

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tensify the damaging sense of perpetual victimization that such leaders rely upon for their continuing power.

Such hypocrisy did not, fortunately, go entirely unmasked. Fred Barbash, a *Washington Post* columnist, wrote,

> The shock expressed by partisan critics, their portrayal of a once-pristine court now forever sullied, drips with irony. Liberals counted on, and exploited, ideologically predictable court voting patterns for decades.

Randy E. Barnett, a professor at Boston University School of Law, also put paid to the liberal commentators' nonsense. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, he noted that

> we are urged that conservative judges must exercise the restraint they say they believe in. It is a convenient argument indeed. A kind of intellectual jujitsu that tries to turn an opponent's own thrusts against him. Activist judges are acting true to their principles when they escape the bounds of the law, while conservative justices are hypocrites if they abandon their principles of 'restraint' to bring wayward courts back to earth. Heads, activist justices win; tails, conservative justices lose.

The reaction and ferocity of the liberal assaults upon the court majority were stunning. Conservatives in the modern era have never mounted anything comparable. It is clear that liberals do not view conservatives as legitimate adversaries but rather as vermin—sexist, racist, hysterical about homosexuality—in short, primitives who are not entitled to govern, who win elections solely because large portions of the American public are equally corrupt. It follows that conservatism has no legitimate role in our politics or law, and, since civilization is at stake, any weapon may be used.

Liberal viciousness and mendacity in its current virulence may be traced to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Since several prominent leftish Democratic senators went down to defeat along with Jimmy Carter, some of us made the mistake of thinking that the election represented a decisive shift in American culture. We could not have been more mistaken. That was the point at which the liberals became vicious, and their fury seems only to have intensified since. The Eighties was the time when the 1960s generation became active in national politics, and they brought their intransigence, intolerance, and irrationality (including a disregard for facts) with them from the campuses to politics and to a swarm of activist organizations. Hatred and intolerance migrated from the campuses to the national scene.

Republicans and conservatives (overlapping but by no means identical categories) behaved as the university faculties and administrations had before them: they went on the defensive and made concessions in futile attempts at appeasement. When they resist, they do so apologetically, rarely with the vigor and relentlessness necessary to meet the liberal attack. As Richard Brookhiser wittily if wistfully said of Republicans, "In their hearts they know they're wrong."

The attacks on Katherine Harris and others demonstrated that the politics of personal destruction, an invention of the Democratic Party, is alive and flourishing. I know something of that technique as do Clarence Thomas, Kenneth Starr, Henry Hyde and the House managers in the Clinton impeachment proceedings, and now John Ashcroft. It is by no means confined to politicians but is the common tactic of much of the media, of academics, and of the luminaries, so to speak, of the entertainment world. America is engaged in a religious war: a contest about culture and the proper ways to live. Judges, though this court-worshipping nation does not realize it, are combatants and extremely powerful ones. The activists, however, know what the public does not. Courts today are, more often than not, the heavy artillery of liberalism, engaged, for example, in creating and expanding a right to abortion, normalizing homosexuality, and driving religion from our public life.

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It is not too surprising that the vast majority of Americans do not understand the role of courts or when they go astray. Constitutional law is like inside baseball: only those who play the game have any chance of real understanding. There is no point in bemoaning the fact that schools and colleges do not teach about constitutional law. Imagine trying to teach the intricacies of just one case, *Bush* v. *Gore*, explaining the comparative merits of basing the decision on the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause or Article II of the Constitution and Section 5 of Title 3 of the U.S. Code. There is no hope whatever that many laymen can be taught to judge the performance of the court across the range of important constitutional issues. The vast majority of us are uninformed about this extremely, and increasingly, powerful branch of government. That ignorance, which seems incurable, does not bode well for American democracy. The American judiciary, both federal and state, has done more to shape our future than any outcome of the 2000 election could possibly have done. That is part of the case for restrained judges: they will leave to the people what belongs to the people, whether the people know it or not. Blankley's warning about Gore's tactics applies equally well to imperialistic courts: they stare us down, daring us to do something about their usurpations, weakening us morally for the next time, and there will always be a next time. The "next time" now comes several times a year in the Supreme Court. And, so long as the result pleases liberals, there is not even a ripple of backlash.

Viewing the win-at-any-cost temper of the Gore forces in Florida, I and others quoted Learned Hand's familiar passage:

> This much I think I do know—that a society so riven that the spirit of moderation is gone, no court *can* save; that a society where that spirit flourishes, no court *need* save; that in a society which evades its responsibility by thrusting upon the courts the nurture of that spirit, that spirit in the end will perish.

True enough, but those words do not quite fit our situation today. Too often overlooked is Hand's immediately following observation. Speaking of the temper of moderation and faith in the sacredness of the individual, he said:

> If you ask me how such a temper and such a faith are bred and fostered, I cannot answer. They are the last flowers of civilization, delicate and easily overrun by the weeds of our sinful human nature; we may even now be witnessing their uprooting and disappearance until in the progress of the ages their seeds can once more find some friendly soil.

Hand was prescient in suggesting that even in his day America might be witnessing the suffocation of the last flowers of civilization by the weeds of our nature. What we see, then, is not courts powerless to enforce moderation but courts too often actively destroying that indispensable virtue. *Bush* v. *Gore* was a valiant effort, legitimate in law, to rein in runaway political passions and a lawless state court those passions had captured.

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Schiller's "Aesthetic Education"

by Roger Kimball

It is now about twenty years since the whole race of Germans began to "transcend." Should they ever wake up to this fact, they will look very odd to themselves.
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1826

It is still the question whether the philosophy of art has anything to say to the artist. [I myself] applied the metaphysic of art too directly to objects and handled it as a practical tool for which it is not quite suitable.
—Friedrich Schiller, 1798

Why does the Aesthetik *of every German philosopher seem to the artist like the abomination of desolation?*
—William James

It is a difficult problem to say why many of the simplest questions are the hardest to answer. Philosophy, of course, is littered with such difficult simplicities: What is truth? What is knowledge? Can virtue be taught? Is there such a thing as free will? What is the good life? Many people, including many philosophers, have dismissed such questions as illegitimate and unanswerable.

Unanswerable they may be, but the human heart can be counted on to dismiss those dismissals. Very few people actively devote themselves to pondering such simple imponderables. That is doubtless a good thing all around, not least for the business of everyday life. But even fewer people, I suspect, are entirely untroubled by such questions. That, too, is a good thing, not least because, as Socrates famously put it, the unexamined life is not worth living. Is that an overstatement? Perhaps. But if it errs, it does so in the right direction. What Socrates did not say—but what Plato's dialogues may show in the dramas they enact—is that there is more than one way to lead an examined life. It may be hard to come up with a satisfactory answer to the question "What is knowledge?" But we all answer that question daily in a currency other than words.

It is the same in other departments of life. "What is justice?" is a question whose answer we *live* even if we cannot put it into adequate words. We know that virtue can be taught because it *is* taught, putative demonstrations of its impossibility notwithstanding.

Among other things, such reflections should inculcate a healthy scepticism—including scepticism about doctrinaire scepticism. Our cleverness, like our language, often fails to produce the unarguable answers we desire. Which doesn't mean that we stop asking, only that we typically find ourselves in that arguable realm where deeds come to the aid of dicta and felt truths illuminate the obscurities left over when reason has done its work. "*La coeur*," as Pascal put it, "*a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*" And the heart's reasons have their own axioms and arguments, their pal-

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pable QEDs that are in their way as persuasive as Euclid's. Intelligence, that is to say, is more than intellection. Can it be purely fortuitous that *sapientia*—wisdom—has its root in *sapor*, taste: a faculty of feeling, intuition, sensibility? What deep truth does that etymology suggest?

Well, the question of taste can be counted on to generate many of those simple questions we cannot definitively answer but also cannot help asking. Consider the question, inevitable when we ponder the operation of taste, of why we care so much about art. *That* we care is graven in the stones of our museums, theaters, and concert halls, embossed on the pages of novels and volumes of poetry, enshrined in the deference—financial, social, spiritual—that the institutions of art command in our society. But why? Art satisfies no practical need; it is not useful in the sense in which a law court or a hospital, a farm or a machinist's shop is useful. And yet we invest art and the institutions that represent it with enormous privilege and prestige. Why? Why is something apparently useless accorded such honor?

One reason, of course, is that utility is not our only criterion of value. We care about many things that are not in any normal sense useful. Indeed for many of the things we care about most, the whole question of use seems peculiarly out of place, a kind of existential category mistake. But we still can ask: what is it about art, about aesthetic experience, that recommends itself so powerfully to our regard?

A lot of ink has been spilled trying to answer that question. The word "aesthetics" was not coined (and the discipline it names was not born) until the middle of the eighteenth century, but a fascination with beauty is perennial. From Plato on down, philosophers and artists—and philosopher-artists—have eulogized beauty as providing intimations of spiritual wholeness and lost unity.

This is one reason that, of all branches of philosophy, aesthetics tends to be the most oleaginous. Especially in times when traditional religious commitments are in retreat, many people look to art for spiritual dividends previously sought elsewhere. This burdens art, and intellectual talk about art, with intoxicating expectations. The expectations are consistently disappointed, but the intoxication remains. The result is the hothouse rhetoric of romanticism, full of infinite longings, sublime impatience, impetuous raids on an ever retreating, capital-A Absolute.

One problem with this tendency to invest art with unanchored religious sentiment is that it makes it difficult to keep art's native satisfactions in focus. The difficulty is compounded because aesthetic delight involves a feeling of wholeness that is easy to mistake for religious exaltation. Art does offer balm for the spirit, but it is not a religious balm. Exactly what sort of balm is it? One of the most impassioned attempts to answer this question was made at the end of the eighteenth century by the German poet, playwright, and philosophical essayist Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

I hasten to add that Schiller did not entirely avoid the confusion of art and religious sentiment. He made an heroic effort to understand and explain why aesthetic experience on its own terms is important. But Erich Heller was right when he observed, in his excellent essay "In Two Minds About Schiller," that Schiller presented

> a striking instance of a European catastrophe of the spirit: the invasion and partial disruption of the aesthetic faculty by unemployed religious impulses. He is one of the most conspicuous and most impressive figures among the host of theologically displaced persons who found a precarious refuge in the emergency camp of Art.

It is a telling biographical detail that as a child Schiller liked to play-act at being a minister. He practiced giving sermons, bestowing benedictions and pronouncing anathemas as the occasion demanded. When it came time for school, he wanted passionately to go to a theological seminary.

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But his father, a low-level army officer in the employ of Duke Karl Eugen of Württemberg, was obliged by the duke to send the thirteen-year old to his newly established military school in Stuttgart. In his biography of Schiller—published in 1825—Thomas Carlyle noted that the six years Schiller spent there were "the most harassing and comfortless of his life." The duke's idea of education was extremely rigid, formed, Carlyle wrote, on the principle "not of cherishing and correcting nature, but rooting it out, and supplying its place with something better."

Schiller studied law and medicine, qualifying in 1780 to become a regimental doctor. But he also threw himself into poetry. His first poem was published in 1777 when he was in his late teens. His first play, *Die Räuber* ("The Robbers"), was printed at Schiller's own expense in 1781 and performed the following year in Mannheim. It was a sensation. A wild *Sturm und Drang* affair, *The Robbers* embodied all of Schiller's frustration at the narrow, regimented life he was forced to lead in the duke's employ. It tells the story of Karl Moor who, falsely accused of criminal activity by his younger brother, flees home and becomes the leader of a vicious band of robbers, his noble nature irreparably tainted by an uncaring society. Things end badly for everyone. Schiller's portrayal of blighted passion and an individual's doomed struggle with recalcitrant authority encapsulated the explosive, antinomian mood of the moment. Coleridge spoke for many when, reading the play in 1794, he wrote to Robert Southey, "My God! Southey! Who is this Schiller? This Convulser of the Heart?"

Duke Eugen, however, was not at all pleased by the spectacle of one of his minions making such a rebellious display. He insisted that Schiller attend to his medical duties and submit any poetry he contemplated publishing to him for approval. Forced to choose between a career with the duke and poetry, Schiller fled Württemberg and took up a post as resident playwright in Mannheim.

The succeeding years saw Schiller struggling to make a living. Indeed, struggle of various sorts was a leitmotif of Schiller's life: a fact of life that became an existential principle. Things tended not to come easily to him. He was undoubtedly a genius, but he lacked the effervescent facility that often attends the character of genius. His was a divided, introspective nature. In this he differed markedly from Goethe, whom he met in 1788, cordially envied, and, at first, disliked. Goethe returned the wariness, if not the envy. But in time the two became friends, literary collaborators, and joint representatives of cultural earnestness—two species of romantic who had mutated into the maturity of classicism.

Schiller later enshrined the difference between Goethe and himself in his essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), one of his best known works. (Thomas Mann called it "the greatest of German essays.") In his view, he and Goethe between them divided the world. "Poets," he wrote, "will either *be* nature, or they will *seek* lost nature. From this arises two entirely different modes of poetry which, between them, exhaust and divide the whole range of poetry." Naïve poets—Homer was the great model and, in his own day, Goethe—were at one with nature and the world: their poetry was realistic, affirmative. Poets he called "sentimental"—by which Schiller meant self-reflective, not cloyingly emotional—were metaphysical latecomers. For them all poetry was a form of elegy: a rehearsal of loss, rupture, distance. Schiller's entire literary output—his critical essays as well as his poetry and drama—forms an illustration of what he meant by *sentimentalische*.

In 1789 Schiller went to Jena to become a professor of history: an appointment that gave him a position but meager financial support. He embarked on a popular history of the Thirty Years War and, in 1790, married Charlotte von Lengefeld. Like many others, he watched with enthusiasm and then horror as the French Revolution unfolded and the Terror took hold. Although

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delicate, Schiller always drove himself mercilessly. In 1791, his health collapsed, apparently from pneumonia exacerbated by overwork. He never fully recovered. It is interesting to consider whether, had he enjoyed Goethe's robust health, he might have enjoyed Goethe's ease of temperament. Bodily vigor may not always yield what Schiller described as a "naïve" sensibility, but its lack certainly renders such simplicity difficult. Goethe once observed that "If a man is to write poetry, he must have a certain good-natured love for the Real." But a good-natured love for the real is considerably aided when the real in its turn appears good-natured.

When Schiller became ill, salvation arrived in the form of a pension from two admirers of his work, Prince Friedrich Christian and Count Ernst von Schimmelmann. Schiller used the freedom his new sinecure provided to throw himself into the study of Kant. The *Critique of Pure Reason* had appeared in 1781—by a nice coincidence, the same year that *The Robbers* was printed—followed by Kant's treatise on ethics, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and, in 1790, the *Critique of Judgment*, his book on aesthetics and teleology. It was a fateful intellectual encounter, the effects of which Schiller himself, like many of his commentators, came to regard with a deep ambivalence.

At the end of 1799, Schiller moved to Weimar. For the remaining five years of his life he was enormously productive. New plays followed in quick succession—*Maria Stuart*, *The Maid of Orleans*, *The Bride of Messina*, *William Tell*, and, at the end, the fragmentary *Demetrius*. In 1802, he received a patent of nobility, and could henceforth style himself von Schiller. By the time of his death, in 1805 at the age of forty-five, his literary reputation in Germany was second only to that of Goethe's. During his final illness, someone asked Schiller how he felt: "calmer and calmer" was the reply. It was a quietus he richly deserved.

In Germany, Schiller, like Goethe, is still a cultural institution, a living presence. In the English-speaking world he has receded to being little more than an occasion for academic lucubration. Many people know he wrote the "Ode to Joy" that Beethoven set as the finale of his Ninth Symphony, but few have actually read his poems. Some of his plays—*The Robbers*, *Don Carlos*, the trilogy *Wallenstein* (for many readers, his masterpiece)—are occasionally read; every now and then one is performed, but far better known is the plot of his late play *William Tell* because it formed the literary basis for Rossini's opera. Philip Toynbee was not quite right when he remarked that "the English have never . . . been very much interested in Schiller. . . . We know that he *must* be a great writer, but we find it hard to respond to his fervent sublimities." At one time, the English responded heartily indeed to those fervent sublimities. Largely through the mediation of Coleridge, Schiller became an important source for English Romanticism. It has been shown, for example, that Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity" has its source, via Coleridge, in a phrase from Schiller.

Schiller was a strange hybrid, half-poet, half-philosopher, total idealist, a sort of Germanic Shelley with less money and more fastidious morals. (Schiller once spoke of himself in a letter as an intellectual *Zwitterart*, a hermaphrodite, a remark that doubtless will form the basis of some Ph.D. thesis in "queer theory" before long.) Schiller described himself as an amateur when it came to philosophy. But it was part of his *sentimentalische* nature to crave for his poetry the imprimatur of philosophical authority. What effect this had on his art is a matter of contention. A common reaction is Erich Heller's: "Friedrich Schiller is the name of a poetical disaster in the history of German literature, a disaster, however, of great splendour." Schiller's addiction to the ideal opened up a gulf that no art could adequately fill.

At the same time, his meditations on the importance of art and the aesthetic dimension of experience are among the most

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evocative and influential ever penned. It is perhaps a dubious honor, but René Wellek was right that Schiller's writings about art "proved to be the fountainhead of all later German critical theory." Although the essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* is probably his most admired single piece, his short book *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is undoubtedly his most influential critical work.[1] Its influence has been both broad and deep. Hegel's whole notion of dialectical progress owes an immense amount to Schiller's treatise. (It was Schiller, for example, who first used the fateful term *aufgehoben* in the paradoxical Hegelian sense of "simultaneously cancelled yet preserved.") And later thinkers, from Nietzsche and Karl Marx to Herbert Read, Georg Lukács, and Herbert Marcuse were in their various ways deeply indebted to the conception of aesthetic freedom that Schiller articulates in *Aesthetic Education*. Marx's fantasy about "unalienated labor" owes a great deal to Schiller's warning about man becoming "merely the imprint of his occupation," while, in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse explicitly invokes Schiller's book when he sets forth his extravagant scenario in which art "invokes a tabooed logic—the logic of gratification as against that of repression." Would Schiller have liked serving as a prop for a radical reading of Freud? I doubt it, but intellectual influence exercises no control over its beneficiaries. Not that Schiller's influence has been confined to the Left (though it is perhaps most conspicuous there). On the contrary, his insistence on the irreducible nature of aesthetic experience, his linking of aesthetic with moral freedom, and his celebration of ornament and the free play of the imagination have deeply impressed thinkers from the other side of the ideological spectrum.

Schiller published *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in 1795, shortly before *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Both first appeared in installments in Schiller's short-lived magazine *Die Horen* ("The Graces"). The book —an extended essay, really—is in the form of a series of letters addressed to Schiller's patron Friedrich Christian. Like Schiller himself, *Aesthetic Education* is an exotic hybrid: part philosophical reflection, part moral exhortation, part poetic effusion. Written during the Terror, as Schiller was revising his opinions about the French Revolution, it has a deliberate political dimension. (Schiller called the letters his "profession of political faith.") In part, Schiller hoped that the success of aesthetic education would help establish the freedom that political revolution had conspicuously failed to achieve.

The essay bears the stamp of many influences. From the art historian Johann Winckelmann came an idealized portrait of classical Greece as the embodiment of human and aesthetic perfection. From the philosopher Johann Fichte came some characteristic muddiness about the ideal man expressing itself in the state. From

1 The most readily available English translation of *Aesthetic Education* is the somewhat daunting scholarly edition by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, published in 1967 by Oxford University Press under their Clarendon Press imprint. Wilkinson and Willoughby were nothing if not thorough. Their edition begins with an introduction of some one hundred and fifty pages, about half again as long as Schiller's text. They print their translation with Schiller's German on facing pages, and follow up with a seventy-page commentary, a thirty-page glossary, and four appendices: one about the history and original publication of the book, one about previous translations, one devoted to schematic illustrations of Schiller's argument ("visual aids"), and the last "On the Impulse to Introduce Redundant Negatives Into Letter XXVI" (an impulse they bravely resist). The editors also provide a twelve-page bibliography and two indices (names and key concepts). The Wilkinson-Willoughby edition is a monument to scholarly industry: erudite, informative, supererogatory. Anyone interested in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, will want to consult it. Most people wishing simply to read the book will be happy to find a copy of Reginald Snell's translation, published by Frederick Ungar in 1954, but now out of print.

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Rousseau come some back-to-nature comments about the dangers that civilization poses to spontaneity. From Goethe, Schiller fashioned his image of the ideal artist. ("You will find in these letters," he wrote to Goethe in 1794 when he was finishing the essay, "a portrait of yourself.") There are traces of Lord Shaftesbury's ideas about the universal nature of social feeling and of Schiller's friend Johann Herder's ideas about art. But far and away the greatest intellectual influence on the book was the philosophy of Kant. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is at once a digest, an homage, and a response to Kant's theories about the nature of aesthetic experience and its relation to moral freedom.

"Tantalizing" is not a word most people associate with the work of Immanuel Kant. But the first half of the *Critique of Judgment*, which deals with the nature of aesthetic judgment, is full of tantalizing observations. Kant saw that the appeal of aesthetic experience was strikingly different from the appeal of sensory pleasure, on the one hand, and the satisfaction we take in the good, moral or practical, on the other. For one thing, with both sensory pleasure and the good, our satisfaction is inextricably bound up with *interest*, which is to say with the existence of whatever it is that is causing the pleasure. When we are hungry, a virtual dinner will not do: we want the meat and potatoes. It is the same with the good: a virtual morality is not moral. But things are different with aesthetic pleasure. There is something peculiarly disengaged about aesthetic pleasure. When it comes to our moral and sensory life, we are constantly reminded that we are creatures of lack: we are hungry and wish to eat, we see the good and know that we fall short. But when we judge something to be beautiful, Kant says, the pleasure we take in that judgment is ideally an "entirely disinterested satisfaction."

The great oddity about aesthetic judgment is that it provides satisfaction without the penalty exacted by desire. This accounts both for its power and for its limitation. The power comes from the feeling of wholeness and integrity that a disinterested satisfaction involves. Pleasure without desire is pleasure unburdened by lack. The limitation comes from the fact that, unburdened by lack, aesthetic pleasure is also unmoored from reality. Precisely because it is disinterested, there is something deeply subjective about aesthetic pleasure: what we enjoy is not an object but our state of mind. Kant spoke in this context of "the free play of the imagination and the understanding" —it is "free" because it is unconstrained by interest or desire.

It is a curious fact that in his reflections on the nature of aesthetic judgment Kant is only incidentally interested in art. The examples of "pure beauty" he provides are notoriously trivial: sea shells, wallpaper, musical fantasies, architectural ornamentation. But Kant was not attempting to provide lessons in art appreciation. He was attempting to explain the mechanics of taste. It is not surprising that the *Critique of Judgment* became an important theoretical document for those interested in abstract art: in Kant's view, the purest beauty was also the most formal.

There is, however, another side to Kant's discussion of beauty. This has to do with the moral dimension of aesthetic judgment. If the pleasure we take in the beautiful is subjective, Kant argues, it is nonetheless not subjective in the same way that sensory pleasure is subjective. You like your steak well-done, I like mine rare: that is a mere subjective preference. But when it comes to the beautiful, Kant observes, we expect broad agreement. And this is because we have faith that the operation of taste—that free play of the imagination and understanding—provides a common ground of judgment. We cannot *prove* that a given object is beautiful because the point at issue is not the object but the state of mind it occasions. Nevertheless, Kant says, "we woo the agreement of everyone else, because we have for it a ground that is common to all." Judgments about the beautiful are in one sense subjective, but in another sense they exhibit

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our common humanity. The feeling of freedom and wholeness that aesthetic experience imparts is thus not merely private but reminds us of our vocation as moral beings. In this context, Kant famously spoke of beauty as being "the symbol of morality" because in aesthetic pleasure "the mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation." Thus it is that although taste is "the faculty of judging an object . . . by an entirely disinterested satisfaction" it is also "at bottom a faculty for judging the sensible illustration of moral ideas."

It would be paltering with the truth to say that Kant's discussion in the *Critique of Judgment* is crystal clear. But it is certainly suggestive. It is rather like what he calls "aesthetical ideas," i.e., products of the imagination "which occasion much thought, but to which no definite concept is adequate." Schiller found Kant's discussion electrifying. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, he endeavored to develop Kant's hints about the link between beauty and freedom, between aesthetic experience and moral fulfillment, into an educational program.

Schiller's basic idea is that, rightly understood, aesthetic experience is not a matter of merely private delectation but has a civilizing function as well. It is part of the human condition that we find ourselves torn between conflicting impulses, between reason and desire, duty and inclination, our purposes as individuals and as members of a community. There is much about the modern world, Schiller thought, that exacerbates those conflicts. The progress of science has yielded rich dividends for our understanding of the world, but it has also encouraged our analytical powers at the expense of our sensuous powers. The demands of specialization make it increasingly difficult to achieve a sense of wholeness in life. This is where the aesthetic comes in. By encouraging the "enlarged mode of thought" that Kant spoke of, aesthetic experience promises to heal these rifts and provide a vision of wholeness.

Schiller places much more emphasis on "the fine arts"—especially the "immortal examples" of classical art—than did Kant, who looked first of all to nature for examples of pure beauty. But like Kant, Schiller dilates on the curious duality of aesthetic experience. He noted that

> beauty gives no individual result whatever, either for the intellect or for the will; it realizes no individual purpose, either intellectual or moral; it discovers no individual truth, helps us perform no individual duty, and is, in a word, equally incapable of establishing the character and enlightening the mind.

For anyone who places an explicit moral burden on art, Schiller's view will be unacceptable. John Ruskin, for example, castigated this passage as "that gross and inconceivable falsehood."

Ruskin might have been somewhat mollified had he read on. For Schiller argues that although in one sense beauty yields nothing definite, in another sense "it is to be looked upon as a condition of the *highest reality*." Only the aesthetic, Schiller wrote, "is a whole in itself": "Here alone do we feel ourselves snatched outside time, and our humanity expresses itself with a purity and integrity as though it had not yet experienced any detriment from the influence of external forces." Of course that heady experience carries with it dangers of its own. If Schiller champions the humanizing power of aesthetic experience, he also warns us against aestheticism: against using the "soul-captivating power" of beauty in the "interest of error and injustice." Precisely because aesthetic experience is disinterested experience, he notes, it involves "a dangerous tendency to neglect all reality entirely and to sacrifice truth and morality to an attractive façade."

Schiller's book is a very rich stew. As he acknowledges, when he waxes philosophical he often presents a path that is "not very exhilarating." Nor is it an entirely consistent path. On the one hand, Schiller speaks of the aesthetic as that which leads us from the life of sensuous appetite to the life of moral

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freedom. In this sense aesthetic education is a step on the road toward moral self-realization. On the other hand, he speaks of the aesthetic as a realm of experience that mediates between the moral and the physical, resolving the tension between them in a higher unity that is both physical and moral, sensuous and intellectual. In this sense, aesthetic education is an end in itself: an experience of freedom that relates "to the totality of our various functions without being a definite object for any single one of them."

Schiller does not really resolve this tension. Yet in one sense the tension underscores Schiller's point: that the aesthetic both points the way towards freedom and is itself an instance of freedom. These elements come together in his description of the aesthetic attitude as a playful attitude, an attitude that delights in appearance for its own sake. Schiller notes that "extreme stupidity and extreme intelligence have a certain affinity with each other, that both seek only the real and are wholly insensible to mere appearance." The serious things in life call for our commitment and intervention; beauty calls us to play. But this play is not frivolous. On the contrary, aesthetic play betokens "a real enlargement of humanity and a decisive step toward culture" because it affirms our humanity in its totality.

"What sort of phenomenon is it," Schiller asks, "that proclaims the approach of a savage to humanity? . . . [I]t is the same in all races who have escaped from the slavery of the animal state: a delight in *appearance*, a disposition toward *ornament* and *play*." The aesthetic simultaneously elevates the sensuous man and softens or cultivates the intellectual. "The reality of things is the work of nature, the appearance of things is the work of man, and a nature that delights in appearance is no longer taking pleasure in what it receives, but in what it does." By cultivating a "disinterested free appreciation of pure appearance"—of seeing and hearing for their own sakes—we not only distance ourselves from the pressures of everyday reality but also affirm ourselves as creatures of freedom: creatures who play.

As the critic Lesley Sharpe observed, Schiller's book on aesthetic education "can be regarded as the supreme statement of faith in the power of human creativity to heal and to restore to wholeness." It is a faith that history has sorely challenged. One thinks, for example, of those Nazi commandants who relaxed from their labors in the camps by listening to Haydn and Mozart. Or think of the preposterous spectacle afforded by contemporary culture, for which art is more often an excuse for pathology or political activism than aesthetic cultivation.

Nevertheless, the nobility of Schiller's vision remains. It challenges us to affirm ourselves in our totality, which means in our incapacity and weakness as well as in our strength. Schiller was everywhere at pains to stress the limits as well as the advantages of the aesthetic. "Man shall *only play* with Beauty," he wrote, "and he shall play *only with Beauty*." If, as Schiller puts it, we are only fully human when we are playing, we are only truly playing when we understand the limits of aesthetic play. The ideal of the beautiful is "the most perfect possible equilibrium of reality and form." One of the chief lessons of aesthetic education is that this ideal must remain always only an ideal, something we approximate, never achieve. Another way of putting this is to say that for man, an inextricably finite creature, wholeness is always partial and beauty is always imperfect.

One of the ironies of Schiller's career is that he understood but refused to embrace this truth. Toward the end of 1795, he wrote to Wilhelm von Humboldt about his vision of the ideal. "Everything that is mortal is dissolved, nothing but light, nothing but freedom . . . no shadow, no barrier. . . . It makes me giddy to think of this task: . . . to compose a scene on Olympus. . . . I may do it one day when my mind is wholly free and cleansed from the pollution of the real world." Of course, that day will never come. That, indeed, was one of the main lessons of Schiller's letters on aesthetic education.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner's "very cultured voice"

by Brooke Allen

The urge to escape is probably as universal, and as intellectually inexplicable, as the urge to procreate. Even the richest, the most beloved, the most successful, the most powerful must occasionally long to get away from their lives. It's not really glamour or adventure one wants; it's anonymity. Driving through the further reaches of Queens, for example, or the Bronx, it often strikes me temptingly that I could change my name, rent one of these identical little houses or rooms, and disappear forever. What do we want to run away from? Habit; routine; soul-deadening daily tasks; obligatory but meaningless social engagements; mind-rotting small talk; the tyranny of family; the arbitrary jollity of holidays; the exhausting responsibilities of love itself.

It is not a subject that is treated often in fiction. One who has done it brilliantly is Sylvia Townsend Warner, the British writer who died in 1978 and was the author of seven novels and countless short stories, 153 of which were published in *The New Yorker*. Beginning with her first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), she treated the instinct for escape with a level of delicacy, humor, and respect that exposed it for what it really is: the defense of one's very soul.

Throughout her long career, Sylvia Townsend Warner enjoyed success and renown, if not fame. Since her death, her work has found a home under the feminist umbrella: feminist because many of her characters were women in search of some variety of independence and also because she was a lesbian who lived openly with her long-time lover, the poet Valentine Ackland, and published their love letters after Valentine's death. But while she could fairly be called a feminist, her fiction is not, I would say, feminist so much as a plea for the freedom and integrity of every person, regardless of sex, and if she can be said to be the heir of any particular writer it would be Samuel Butler, one of the great misogynists of all time. She admitted to "reprobating" both church and family and managed to be consistently subversive to the received values of both institutions while at the same time practicing, in her own life, strict monogamy, a wide range of domestic skills, and admirable industry. In short she excelled in the bourgeois virtues while despising most bourgeois values.

Lolly Willowes, Warner's first novel, remains her best known and has recently been reissued.[1] Laura Willowes is what the young Sylvia Townsend Warner might, under slightly different circumstances, have become. An upper-middle-class country girl, Laura sees no reason to marry: she and her father are everything to one another, and she takes no interest in young men. When her father unexpectedly dies, the world as she knows it comes to an end, and, being an old-fashioned girl and not in the habit of

1 *Lolly Willowes*, by Sylvia Townsend Warner; New York Review Books, 222 pages, $12.95.

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questioning plans made for her, she falls in with the standard scenario for women of her class and type.

> Even in 1902 there were some forward spirits who wondered why that Miss Willowes, who was quite well off, and not likely to marry, did not make a home for herself and take up something artistic or emancipated. Such possibilities did not occur to any of Laura's relations. Her father being dead, they took it for granted that she should be absorbed into the household of one brother or the other. And Laura, feeling rather as if she were a piece of property forgotten in the will, was ready to be disposed of as they should think best.

Laura's beloved childhood home goes to a brother who doesn't care about it, and she goes to the other brother in London, who cares not much more about her. She spends more than twenty years in what amounts to comfortable and well-upholstered servitude to her spoiled brother, his capable cipher of a wife, and their uninteresting children. On the surface, she is everyone's familiar, predictable Aunt Lolly, confirmed in "the habit of useless activity."

Her inner life is rather different.

> But while her body sat before the first fires and was cosy with Henry and Caroline, her mind walked by lonely seaboards, in marshes and fens, or came at nightfall to the edge of a wood. She never imagined herself in these places by daylight. She never thought of them as being in any way beautiful. It was not beauty at all that she wanted. . . . Her mind was groping after something that eluded her experience, a something that was shadowy and menacing, and yet in some way congenial.

Finally, awoken from her spiritual slumber by the sight of an armful of beech leaves in a flower shop, Laura decides to leave her brother's house and move to a village in the Chilterns called Great Mop, a wild place where she has no ties and no acquaintance. Her brother, it turns out, has speculated with her capital, and she has very little money left, but it is enough to purchase freedom. Little by little, she begins to feel at home in Great Mop, to shake off her chains, and respond to the place's hard, elusive spirit.

But then her charming and self-involved nephew Titus comes for a visit, likes the place, and decides that he will move there too. Laura is appalled, "shaken and sick with the grinding anger of the slave." In despair, she calls for help, and is answered not by God but by Satan. She makes a pact with him and becomes a witch; discovers, in fact, that nearly everyone in Great Mop is a witch or warlock. The unsuspecting Titus is driven off by a series of harmless spells, Laura happily joins her new community, and the story ends satisfactorily for everyone.

Lolly Willowes, Warner's first book, is the only one that could be described as explicitly feminist.

> "When I think of witches [Laura remarks to the Devil], I seem to see all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded. If they could be passive and unnoticed, it wouldn't matter. But they must be active, and still not noticed. Doing, doing, doing, till mere habit scolds at them like a housewife, and rouses them up—when they might sit in their doorways and think—to be doing still!"

Her later novels and stories would still condone the breaching of social and family constraints, but would venture well beyond the purely feminist zone.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's life is chronicled in Claire Harman's fine 1989 biography, now sadly out of print. She was born in 1893, into a conventional late Victorian society that was soon to change forever. Her father, George Townsend Warner, was a legendary history master at Harrow, the great public school, and Sylvia was his best friend and, intellectually, his creation; as an only child she received the full force of his love and his very considerable educative zeal. (One former pupil, the novelist L. P. Hartley, recalled him as "a teacher of the first order

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[who] got more out of his pupils than it seemed in their power to give. He was a genius.") After an unsuccessful year at a local kindergarten, where Sylvia behaved so obstreperously that her parents were asked to remove her, she was educated entirely at home. She more than repaid the attention, being, according to an aunt, "an abnormally intelligent child, even at an early age."

A ferocious, frizzy-haired bluestocking who took no interest in parties or young men, Sylvia was a disappointment to her mother, Nora, but was her father's pride. Her first love was music; she studied piano and organ, music theory and history under the tutelage of the well-known musicologist Percy Buck, another Harrow master who was to be not only her mentor but her long-time lover as well. By 1911 she was composing regularly; in 1914 she was planning to go to the continent to study with Arnold Schönberg when the war intervened.

In 1917 George Townsend Warner, who had been engaged in secret war work, suddenly died, possibly of a burst stomach ulcer. Sylvia was, as she recalled many years, "mutilated." "It was as though I had been crippled and at the same moment realized that I must make my journey alone," she wrote. With a tiny income of £100 a year, Sylvia felt unable to launch out on a life of her own, as she would have liked, especially since her mother's devouring grief and dependence held her in a death-grip. She might have gone the unfortunate way of Laura Willowes had an extraordinarily convenient offer not come her way in the form of a project, funded by the Carnegie (U.K.) Trust, to collect, edit, and publish the entire corpus of Elizabethan and Henrician church music. Sylvia was to be one of five editors. The project was expected to last for about five years; in the end it took twelve.

Sylvia was much younger and less experienced than the other editors, and one can only go along with Harman's assumption that Percy Buck, also on the committee, arranged the job to provide her with an independence. With her new salary of three pounds a week, she moved to London, alone for the first time in her life and delighted to be so.

Young and tender she may have been, but she possessed a powerful personality of a peculiarly English sort; she had enough of the Victorian *pukka memsahib* in her background and character not to mind making an impression, or to be easily embarrassed. Sylvia had "this extraordinary, this very cultured voice," said her friend Bea Howe, "but she never altered her talk when she was speaking either to her daily or a roadmender, or anybody she wanted to have a talk with." Looking back on his first meeting with her in 1922, David Garnett remembered

> an alarming lady with a clear and minatory voice, dark, dripping with tassels—like a black and slender Barb caparisoned for war—with jingling ear-rings, swinging fox-tails, black silk acorn hanging from umbrella, black tasselled gloves, dog chains, key rings, tripped lightly in and speaking to me in sentences like scissors told me . . . it was you, dearest Sylvia.

With the passing years, she toned down the sartorial flourishes—in old age she came to look rather like Dame Margaret Rutherford in the role of Miss Marple—but never softened her approach.

Aware that she was not quite talented enough for a career as a composer, Sylvia turned to writing. She had always written poetry for her own pleasure, and in 1925 she published the first of her many volumes of verse, *The Espalier.* It was well-reviewed and earned her some influential admirers. *Lolly Willowes* appeared a year later. It proved both a fashionable and a critical success, the "smart" thing to read that season, and played into a current vogue for so-called fantasy novels. A bestseller in England—the only one of Sylvia's books to attain this status—it was also a success in the United States and was the first choice of the newly launched Book-of-the-Month Club.

A second novel, the charming *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, came out in 1927. Each of

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Sylvia's novels was to be entirely different from one another in setting and theme, and in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* she forsook the contemporary England of *Lolly Willowes* for a South Sea island in the late Victorian era. Timothy Fortune is a naïve, well-meaning man whose career as a bank clerk has been interrupted by a dissatisfied yearning which he interprets as a vocation for the church. He travels to the remote island of Fanua as a missionary and begins an attempt to convert the happy-go-lucky islanders. In three years he makes only one convert, the beautiful boy Lueli who has attached himself to him from the very beginning. Eventually, however, Mr. Fortune discovers that Lueli still worships, in secret, the fetish that represents his god and only goes along with the Christian rituals out of politeness. Although the fetish is destroyed, it is Mr. Fortune, and not Lueli, who loses his god, and in a fever of remorse he banishes himself from Fanua's paradise of beauty and innocence.

Her next novel, published in 1929, was *The True Heart*, a retelling of the Cupid and Psyche tale, set in the Essex Marshes in the late nineteenth century. It is a beautifully told story, but puzzling to many readers in that it deals with a heroine who is simple almost to the point of simple-mindedness. It met with polite but not very enthusiastic reviews, though it has always had its share of admirers.

By 1929 Sylvia's own true heart was wavering a bit: her long affair with the married Percy Buck was winding down after seventeen years. She was in any case beginning to feel middle-aged and unattractive; when a French friend, after boasting of her own lovers, asked about Sylvia's, she replied that she "should require a little notice in order to beat the moth out of them." Not long after putting an end to her relationship with Buck she met Valentine Ackland, a solitary, thoughtful woman twelve years her junior.

The "marriage" of Sylvia and Valentine, which lasted, despite a couple of serious glitches in the late 1940s, until Valentine's death in 1969, was one of those strange love stories in which chemistry inexplicably triumphs over character. Sylvia was a strong and at times overpowering woman, confident, industrious, happy by nature, cheerfully irreligious, mentally and physically healthy. Valentine was depressive, intelligent but uncertain of herself (she suffered, as we would say now, from "low self-esteem"), physically vulnerable though tall and handsome, alcoholic, and guilt-ridden. Sylvia was gregarious; Valentine, painfully shy. Sylvia was from the very beginning a successful author, and once her relationship with *The New Yorker*—she called the magazine her "gentleman friend"—was established in the late Thirties she earned a very respectable living; Valentine never made more than a pittance from her writing and suffered from a crushing sense of professional failure.

Sylvia, Valentine later wrote, "has a character that does not doubt itself: when she makes a mistake she does not doubt for a moment but that it is *not* a mistake, and when she discovers beyond doubt that it *is* one, she feels no despair. I wish I had that kind of courage but as I have not I must study to endure instead." Sylvia, however, thought that Valentine "has more heart. My heart is passionate, but it has a rind on it, a pomegranate heart. Hers has a fine skin, a fig heart." Nevertheless, the two were happy together. They quickly settled into the country life that was congenial to both of them, moving several times before finally finding Frome Vauchurch in Maiden Newton, Dorset.

In 1935 the two women, disturbed by the ominous events in Europe, joined the Communist Party. It was the closest thing to a religious faith Sylvia ever possessed, and she retained her admiration for Stalin and his works long after more sensitive souls, including Valentine, had turned from the Soviet example in revulsion. Throughout the rest of the Thirties, party activities occupied a substantial portion of Valentine's and Sylvia's energies: among other duties they spent two weeks in Spain during the

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Civil War as delegates to the 2nd International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture. Sylvia was slyly observed on this trip by a rather unsympathetic fellow-delegate, the young Stephen Spender, who was to put her into his memoir *World Within World* as "the Communist lady writer" who

> looked like, and behaved like, a vicar's wife presiding over a tea party given on a vicarage lawn as large as the whole of Republican Spain. Her extensory smiling mouth and her secretly superior eyes under her shovel hat made her graciously forbidding. She insisted —rather cruelly, I thought—on calling everyone "comrade," and to me her sentences usually began, "Wouldn't it be less selfish, comrade," which she followed by recommending some course of action highly convenient from her point of view.

Summer Will Show (1936), written under the spell of her new political faith, is Sylvia's only really bad novel; as with almost all doctrinaire fiction, its "message" eats away at its essence. It describes the adventures of Sophia Willoughby, an early Victorian Englishwoman who, having lost her two children to smallpox, comes to Paris to try to snare her shallow, insubstantial husband into giving her a third. Once there she falls under the spell of his revolutionary lover, a Lithuanian Jew named Minna Lemuel, and takes part in the 1848 revolution. The first part of the book, dealing with Sophia, her two children, and their deaths, is powerful and, at times, hair-raising, but then it was written before Sylvia had developed a political agenda. The French portion of the story is nothing but bad, as well as misguided, political fiction.

In 1938 she published *After the Death of Don Juan*, a novel that begins where the libretto of Don Giovanni leaves off. It was, as she wrote, "a parable, or an allegory, or what you will, of the political chemistry of the Spanish War, with the Don Juan—more of Molière than of Mozart—developing as the Fascist of the piece."

The Second World War changed the world Sylvia and Valentine had been born into almost beyond recognition. As the postwar years progressed Sylvia stubbornly held onto her Communist faith, but Valentine, by now uncomfortably aware of Stalin's iniquities, turned away from her earlier allegiance. A woman who strongly felt the need for faith of some description, she turned to Christianity, eventually being accepted into the Catholic Church (although later, in the wake of Vatican II, she rejected Catholicism in favor of Quakerism). This was territory onto which Sylvia was unable to venture, for she vehemently disliked Christian mysticism. When Valentine wrote in her diary, for example, that "Only the eternal Creator could conceivably forgive what I have done," Sylvia replied brilliantly, in a vein that was characteristically bracing:

> You are aligning yourself with the great majority of Xian thinkers in thus expressing a latent dislike of God; for to draw this rigid line between what you can do and what God can do is, in effect, to assert that you and God have nothing in common, that though you may love him (*odi et amo*) you do not think that humankind can accept him as a fellow-citizen of the universe. This arbitrary quarantining of the creator is the odder in the sentence quoted because it is so plainly unjustified. It is ridiculous to assert that forgiveness is only possible to God. To err is human, and to forgive is human, too.

Sylvia's own spirituality, such as it was, was earthbound and pagan. In 1948 she published *The Corner That Held Them*, a novel set in an English convent between 1345 and 1382, the era of the Peasant Revolt and the Black Death. The concerns of Warner's nuns are almost exclusively practical and economic; a less spiritual group of women it would be hard to find outside of a Wall Street brokerage house. *The Corner That Held Them* is experimental in an understated, unshowy way; there is no plot per se, and no major character, and the action passes as smoothly and arbitrarily as life itself. Unfortunately, the novel—though it

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was Sylvia's personal favorite—evokes the nuns' lives perhaps too well, in that it has a cumulatively soporific effect.

My own favorite among the novels is *The Flint Anchor* (1954), a devastating critique of Victorian ethics that focuses on a upper-middle-class Norfolk family. The historical novel tends for any number of reasons to be an unsatisfactory genre, but Sylvia had an uncanny ability to imagine her way into the mental environment of an era. *The Flint Anchor* is in effect a novel that Thackeray might have written if he had not had to abide by the pretensions and constraints of his day. Adultery, homosexuality, alcoholism are all dealt with explicitly, in a way that the Victorian novelists were never allowed to do: Samuel Butler, for example, chose not to publish *The Way of All Flesh*, whose blistering honesty would have created a scandal in the 1880s, and it only saw the light of day in 1903, when the world was ready.

Sylvia wholeheartedly shared Butler's view of conventional family life as a constraint and a prison. *The Flint Anchor*'s patriarch John Barnard, like Butler's Theobald Pontifex, has good intentions without good instincts. He follows, almost slavishly, the courses of action prescribed by his culture in his efforts to mold his wife and numerous children into acceptable shapes. The results are uniformly disastrous, and in old age he clearly sees his past life, "springing like some malformed tree from where he had planted it in a bad love. Every branch of it was twisted awry, and from the branches hung calamities like dismal fruit."

Sylvia's own old age was a time of great creative energy: she published a remarkable assortment of short stories, translated Proust for Chatto & Windus, and wrote a biography of T. H. White which proved greatly popular, as well-reviewed as anything she had written since *Lolly Willowes*. Valentine died of cancer in 1969; Sylvia's grief was intense, and she raged against the indignities of her own advancing years. But eventually her spirits rallied and she lived on, busily writing almost to the end, until her own death on May 1, 1978.

While Sylvia Townsend Warner left behind a fine group of novels, I think her short stories will, on the whole, endure longer. She wrote a great many: there are fourteen published volumes of them, as well as an excellent *Selected Short Stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner* chosen by her literary executors, Susanna Pinney and William Maxwell. Counterpoint Press has recently published Maxwell and Warner's charming correspondence, as well as a group of previously uncollected short stories, *The Music At Long Verney*, both edited by Michael Steinman.[2]

Both of these volumes are extremely welcome and even necessary, since Warner's books (with the exception of *Lolly Willowes*) are out of print, and she has for some time been in danger of being forgotten. *The Music at Long Verney*, in fact, comes as a real surprise: each story in it is first-rate, and some are among her very best; why were they not anthologized before?

"An Aging Head" is clearly drawn from the author's own character and, to some extent, her experience. Georgina is a sixtyish woman, strong and independent; she likes living alone but likes, too, the ever-reliable devotion of her rejected suitors, particularly the faithful George. After a bad flu, however, she finds that the scene has subtly shifted: she is no longer in command of every situation, and she watches grimly as George takes an unexpected interest in her despised niece, Antonia.

> She heard their diminishing voices, and their lingering farewells. She heard George cough, and Antonia deplore. She heard them start their cars and drive away. Presently they would set out on an entirely novel way of life, hyphenated into George-and-Antonia—one of those late marriages that at first seem so surprising and soon after seem so natural that

2 *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, 1938–1978*, edited by Michael Steinman (356 pages, $27.50) and *The Music at Long Verney: Twenty Stories*, by Sylvia Townsend Warner (192 pages, $24).

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> one can't imagine why they did not happen earlier. And she would go on pretty much as usual—an aunt to Antonia, to George an old acquaintance, a headless phantom. They would always treat her with kindness, and Antonia would unfailingly remember her birthday and ask her to lunch.

Other stories, too, stand out. "Tebic" is an indescribably delightful picture of a happy marriage and its feeble, benign little deceptions; "QWERTYUIOP" is a vivid memory of what it feels like to be a child, straining at the chains that bind one to one's unsatisfactory adult relations.

The Music at Long Verney also contains five stories about Mr. Edom, the canny antiques dealer who made several appearances in *The New Yorker* before William Shawn grew tired of the series and asked that it be suspended. The Edom stories are among Warner's more muted, less spectacular pieces of work, but in their lightly ironic way they give considerable pleasure. Valentine ran an antique business for several years, and Sylvia, like Mr. Edom, was well aware of the imaginative and emotional power an object can hold over a person.

"A Brief Ownership" shows the happy side of Warner at its best. Its narrator, flipping through a gazetteer of Scotland, finds a town named Dull that inspires an extended fantasy. "In spirit," she says, "I had already struck root in Dull," and settled in a stone house called Dull Lodge. "I did no gardening, because I had gone to Dull Lodge in order to retire. I had furnished it with retirement in view. For once in my life, I had a sufficiency of bookshelves. I also had four black horsehair sofas." The narrator lies on a sofa for hours on end, reading about nineteenth-century Church of England bishops.

> Thus, moving from bishop to bishop, returning them to the London Library and unpacking new ones (it was extremely rare for a bishop to be unavailable), listening to the wind, watching the changing color of the fields, admiring the snowdrops, eating quantities of ripe figs, tapping the barometer, strolling out in the wistful autumnal dusk when the gardener would not be about to suspect my intentions and even staying out long enough to see the public lighting of Dull extinguished at 10:30 P.M., I lived in contentment and satisfaction at Dull Lodge.

A beautiful and eccentric fantasy, which at the end is rudely interrupted when the narrator discovers that the real Dull is something quite different, not at all what she had in mind.

"A love affair in letters" is one of literature's more tired clichés, but it might be used almost seriously of Warner's long correspondence with William Maxwell. As a junior editor at *The New Yorker*, he "inherited" Warner when her previous editor, Katharine White, left the magazine in 1938. They met for the first time the next year. "She was dressed in black," he later wrote. "Her voice had a slightly husky, intimate quality. Her conversation was so enchanting it made my head swim. I did not want to let her out of my sight."

In fact, Maxwell and Warner were to meet seldom over the course of their friendship, and perhaps this is what makes the correspondence so free and lighthearted. As Claire Harman has written, "Some of Sylvia's most highly valued friendships were founded and maintained by her transatlantic correspondences. She loved, and needed, the uncluttered intellectual intimacy which depended on distance and separateness and which such correspondence allowed." The fact that the two writers inhabited entirely different worlds is a mixed blessing for the reader. On the debit side, they had no friends in common, and therefore the correspondence contains no gossip and is astonishingly free of malice. Maxwell was a famously gentle and kind human being, but Sylvia possessed a healthily bitchy side; that side, however, was not in evidence when she wrote to Maxwell. In the credit column, though, the reader is not inundated with the usual foot-

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notes explaining personal references, since there are none; all the "conversation" comprised by the letters is general, and very fine conversation it is, too.

A significant portion of the correspondence is concerned with writing, as is to be expected between a writer and her editor, who was also a fine novelist in his own right. Maxwell had a properly ambivalent attitude toward editorial work: "I'm glad you think I'm a good editor," he wrote to Warner in 1947, "even though a still small voice tells me that there is no such thing for writers of quality and that they should be left strictly to their own devices."

Following that principle, it seems to me that the only way to give the reader a real idea of these lovely letters is to give a few appetizers, as it were. For instance, on their own and each other's work:

> I sometimes think that I am alone in recognising what a moral writer I am. I don't myself, while I am writing; but when I read myself afterwards I see my moral purpose shining out like a bad fish in a dark larder. (Warner to Maxwell, 9/16/62)

> I am not so sure that you can be said to have a moral purpose at all. You have a moral tone. (Maxwell to Warner, 10/2/62)

> What a grand (in the sense that Sir Joshua Reynolds used the word) bore. [Here Maxwell is referring to a character in Warner's story "An Act of Reparation."] I sometimes think people aren't as boring as they used to be when I was young, and you have renewed my faith in human nature.
> (Maxwell to Warner, 7/15/63)

> *On other writers:*
> I think you will come to Balzac yet. When one has disproved all one's theories, outgrown all of one's standards, discarded all one's criterions, and left off minding about one's appearance, one comes to Balzac. And there he is, waiting outside his canvas tent—with such a circus going on inside. (Warner to Maxwell, 1/28/61)

> I so much don't envy myself the job of reviewing [Virginia Woolf's] letters that I haven't done it. One curious thing I noticed—that there are three people she shows off to, Strachey, Duncan Grant, and Vanessa, and usually it is by being harsh or cruel or unkind or unfeeling about somebody. As if it were a game they played. (Maxwell to Warner, 11/12/76)

> *On religion:*
> I find myself envying people who believe in the Management, but that isn't of course the same thing as believing in it.
> (Maxwell to Warner, 10/22/62)

> I will keep my views on God the Father to myself, only remarking that he repented him that he made man—a common fatherly custom. (Warner to Maxwell, 6/11/76)

> *On politics:*
> I despair of my country. If there was a wilderness I would cry out in it, but that too we've disposed of. (Maxwell to Warner, 4/9/68)

For a writer, Sylvia Townsend Warner was unusually sane and clearheaded about her own talents. She had a healthy measure of professional self-respect while accepting that her work was not, perhaps, of the very highest rank. After having translated Proust's *Contre Saint-Beuve*, she confided to her diary that "even at my best, I could never write like that, for I have not got that stuff of genius, that steady furnace, only a few rockets and Catherine wheels." If she had a serious fault it was a very English tolerance for unnecessary whimsy and fancy, and at her worst the shadow of the vicar's wife, to use Spender's comparison, can fall over her fiction. She was at her best where her sensibilities and ideas diverged from those of her caste rather than reflecting them; at such moments she commanded a cool ruthlessness and an entirely individual lack of sentiment. She deserves to be far better known than she is, and it is to be hoped that Counterpoint Press's efforts will revive an interest in her unusual body of work.

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The potency of pure painting: Manet's still lifes

by Karen Wilkin

On a visit to Venice, exasperated by the endless allegorical pictures and scenes from *Gerusalemma Liberata* and *Orlando Furioso* and "all that rubbish," Edouard Manet is supposed to have told an artist friend that "a painter can say all he wants to with fruit or flowers or even clouds." It is a straightforward statement about art-making right up there with Caravaggio's reported assertion that "there was as much 'workmanship' in a still life as in a figure." These succinct observations collapse the passage of time, offering vivid evidence that despite the seemingly unbridgeable accumulation of years separating them from each other, both Manet and his seventeenth-century predecessor were concerned with the same pragmatic, formal, hands-on issues that have always engaged serious, working painters—even serious, working painters who also happened to have changed the course of art history.

This is not to wrench either artist out of context. Whether or not Caravaggio believed that in terms of sheer painterly engagement baskets of fruit and musical instruments required "as much workmanship" as any other part of a picture, the still lifes that he painted with such inventiveness and virtuosity are usually subservient in his canvases to the androgynous youths, beplumed *bravi*, and ambiguous saints who enact his tense dramas—which is to be expected in an era when an artist was judged by his ability to paint large-scale figures. Such hierarchical categories of worth were becoming less rigid by the 1860s when Manet began to exhibit, but at the beginning of his career, he, too, strove to establish his presence by means of large figure compositions. In some of these he included, as Caravaggio did before him, eloquently painted still life components crucial both to the structure of the picture and to the establishment of the moment and place. Think of the discarded clothing and the capsized basket of fruit in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or the remains of the meal and the pile of studio props in *The Luncheon in the Studio*, or even the bouquet carried by the servant in *Olympia*. The painter who can be described as the first great modernist can also be categorized, not inaccurately, as the last exponent of the great tradition of Western figure painting. No matter how absorbing or significant the still life inclusions in his pictures, Manet, from *Olympia* in 1863 to *The Bar at the Folies Bergère* almost two decades later, is so closely associated with large, assertively painted images of the figure that it comes as surprise to learn that he painted some eighty pictures of "fruit or flowers"—or fish or vegetables—during his all-too brief career (born in 1832, he died, presumably of syphilis, in 1883). This number, we are told, amounts to roughly one-fifth of Manet's lifetime's work.

In terms of public reception in his day, he might have done better to paint even more still lifes. Some critics who initially found *Le*

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Déjeuner or *Olympia* vulgar in subject and wanting in execution were receptive to Manet's treatment of inanimate objects, perhaps believing that such themes were more appropriate to his talents. One writer who had been particularly harsh even bought a small still life—"two flowers in a vase, a little nothing," according to Manet—causing the painter to hope briefly for a more sympathetic reception in print in the future, although, as it turned out, no such softening was forthcoming.

If you've ever been stopped in your tracks by the pure painterly brilliance of Manet's peonies in the Musée d'Orsay, by that opulent fish in Chicago, or that delectable basket of plums in Boston, it's easy to understand how even resistant critics might succumb to the allure of his still life paintings. These ravishing pictures confirm Manet's observation that "a painter can say all he wants to" with still life and confirm, too, the truth of another remark, made late in his life, that "still life is the touchstone of the painter." Yet learning that still lifes account for 20 percent of his oeuvre is startling. Startling, too, given this remarkable statistic, is that until this fall, when "Manet: The Still-Life Paintings," opened in Paris, no major exhibition of this aspect of his work had been organized. Fortunately, this delightful and informative exhibit of fifty or so examples can be seen this spring at the Walters Art Gallery, in Baltimore, its only American showing. It is a relatively modest exhibition, but as Michelin says, worth the journey.[1]

The curator, George Mauner, Professor Emeritus of Art History at Pennsylvania State University, has organized the exhibition to reflect his conception of the various ways Manet approached still life, so the show is divided into sections devoted to rather over-determined categories such as "The Still Life as Self-Portrait," "Still Life and the Figure: Objects as Emblems," and "The Portable Still Life"—this last dedicated to Spanish-derived images of boys carrying trays—along with the more general groupings of "Fruits and Vegetables" and "The Last Flowers." Since Manet painted still lifes, or pictures in which still life elements play an important role, throughout his career and since the show is generally arranged chronologically, the exhibit functions as a miniature retrospective. The generous selection at the Walters includes works—some familiar, some rarely seen—that catalogue almost the full spectrum of Manet's achievement.

The chronology begins with two very early, rather tentative canvases, *Young Man with Cherries* (1858, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon) and *Woman with Pitcher, or Portrait of Mme. Manet Holding a Ewer* (1858–60, Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen). A group of more accomplished works of almost the same period, including a charming homage to Velázquez, *Spanish Cavaliers with Boy Carrying a Tray* (1860, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon), announces the young painter's fascination with Spanish art and Spanish motifs at the beginning of his career and offers evidence, as well, of the rapid development of the hallmarks of the early Manet: a highly individual, broad touch and an acute sensitivity to tonality and subtle, light-drenched color. The show ends with a group of flowers in vases from Manet's last year of life. Painted when he was desperately ill, the best of them are energetic and dazzling, with their rapidly evoked particularities of petals and the complexities of stems and leaves seen through water and crystal; an explosion of white lilacs from Berlin and a tight gathering of moss roses from the Clark Art Institute are among the show's standouts. What unites all of these assured, economical late pictures are their centralized composi-

1 "Manet: The Still-Life Paintings" opened at the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, on January 28, 2001 and remains on view until April 22. It was previously seen at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, from October 11, 2000–January 7, 2001. A catalogue of the show, by George L. Mauner and Henri Loyrette, has been published by Harry N. Abrams (192 pages, $39.95).

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tions, as uncompromisingly frontal as the enigmatic barmaid in *The Bar at the Folies Bergère* (where still life elements also play an important role). Like this confrontational late masterpiece—with its irrational reflections, which simultaneously raise and defeat your expectations of the logic of what the eye perceives and all but overwhelm the image of a young woman behind a marble counter loaded with fruit and bottles—the late flower paintings are ultimately as much about seeing itself as they are about the delicacy and freshness of flowers, or the brilliance of water and crystal.

In between Manet's youthful and mature achievements are such marvels as Chicago's spiralling *Fish and Oyster, or Still Life with Fish* (1864), with its molten blacks and endlessly varied patches of gray, rose, and off-white, engagingly paired with a sparser, but no less visually sumptuous variation on the theme from the same year: the Musée d'Orsay's elegant, near monochrome *Eel and Mullet*, an improvisation on the contrast between angular knife and sinuous fish, rucked-up white linen and glittering scales. Boston's gorgeous pile of blue, green, and red plums is there and so are the d'Orsay's irresistible peony paintings—those miraculous transformations of paint into powerful equivalents for smooth, thick petals. In the little *Peonies and Pruning Shears* (1864), Manet manages to suggest moist, full-blown white blossoms with staccato strokes of pale yellow-green, pale pink, and cream set against luminous grays. In the picture's mate, *Peony Stems and Pruning Shears*, painted the same year, he turns a trio of pink, burgundy, and pale rose peonies propped upside down against a wall into a metaphorical tribute to Chardin; the spill of blossoms, the gray ledge, the luminous, neutral ground, all immediately recall the eighteenth-century master's hanging hares despite the acute differences in material presence, at the same time that the rosy palette and spreading triangular configuration call to mind his celebrated early tour de force of the spreading, gutted ray.

At the Walters, this largely chronological, thematic selection also suggests, almost coincidentally, the difference between the public and the private Manet. The exhibition ranges from compositions clearly intended (however modest their subject) to declare the artist's presence to the world to simpler paintings given to people he was fond of to decorated letters sent to intimates. Finally, there are the works made for the painter's pleasure alone: most poignantly, perhaps, the last paintings of the bouquets offered by friends when he was too ill to leave home.

Obviously, "Manet: The Still-Life Paintings," includes many first-rate pictures and some real show stoppers. The organizers' greatest coup must be counted the presence of the great 1868 portrait of Emile Zola, from the Musée d'Orsay, included because of the complex "still life" of books, pamphlets, images, and a Japanese screen that serves to locate and identify the sitter, enliven the setting, and illuminate the relationship (and the aesthetic) of the painter and his champion. It's a painting that continues to astonish, despite its iconic status, in part because of the way Zola's pale face and hands emerge from the inky darkness of coat, background, and beard, in part because of the surprise of seeing that all the notes of color, however subdued, have been pushed to the periphery, and in part because of the way the pose carves out space—a lesson not lost on Matisse when he painted the right-hand figure in the *Bathers with a Turtle* (St. Louis Museum of Art), the monumental nude whose seated posture turns a flat plane, momentarily, into ambiguous three-dimensionality. Yet many of the works at the Walters were selected primarily because of their motifs—to illustrate a theme—and not all of them represent Manet at his highest level of achievement. That unevenness, however, makes the show more absorbing, not less.

Not even the most enthusiastic viewer could find *Young Man with Cherries* or *Woman with Pitcher* a wholly satisfying picture, yet they are fascinating for what they

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reveal about their author's development. Both are obviously the work of a young artist—Manet was in his late twenties when he painted them—who was trying to reconcile his admiration for earlier masters and his discontent with the officially sanctioned work of his own time. The boldness and directness of *Young Man with Cherries* seems fresh and modern, as does the forthright paint-handling, but the rather sentimental image of a smiling, flat-nosed boy is hard to warm to, although Manet's orchestration of reds against a range of grays and a little dull green is appealing and unexpected, as is the sense of cool, sensitively observed daylight. For all the picture's pretense at anecdote, Chardin clearly haunts the pose, the sober palette, the indeterminate background, and the stone ledge against which the boy leans, as he spills his armful of cherries. (It's worth noting that Manet's even more overt homage to Chardin, the superb, broadly stroked 1867 portrait of a young man blowing soap bubbles, is in the same collection as *Young Man with Cherries*—exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum not long ago.) Similarly, Titian's presence is palpable in *Woman with Pitcher*—Manet had not yet lost patience with the Venetians—despite the painting's being unfinished, in poor condition, and, at heart, pretty conventional. In spite of this helpful example, the foreshortening of the arm and the pitcher seem to have posed some problems, although the tenderly and firmly painted head points to what the young artist would soon be capable of.

What is perhaps most striking is that whatever the infelicities of drawing and handling in these early works, they already reverberate with the boldly stated sense of connection with the past and the equally bold disregard of its conventions that are so much a part of Manet's subsequent work—and that Michael Fried finds integral to what he calls "Manet's modernism." This avowal of simultaneous continuity and rupture with tradition is achieved, in part, through the painter's overt revelation of both his means and his sources. Just as he refuses to disguise either his touch or the works from the past that have provoked his inventions, he refuses, too, to deny the essential artifice of painting itself. This notion is examined in the section of the exhibition titled "The Still-Life as Self-Portrait," which brings together a group of images of an assortment of Spanish props—a hat, a guitar, a high-heeled shoe, and other items of clothing—piled haphazardly in a basket. It seems to have had special meaning for Manet, who hung a freely brushed 1862 canvas of the motif, in this version set against a theater curtain (now in the Musée Calvet, Avignon), as a decoration over the door of his studio, while the same Spanish "dressing up basket" appears again in an etching that served as the frontispiece of an edition of his prints. That Manet thought of this accumulation of disguises as an emblem of the artist, or at least of the artist's practice, is underscored by another etching in which the basket of props is associated with a picture, theatrical weapons, and a *Polichinelle*—a character sometimes interpreted as a self-portrait of Manet—who peers out from behind the theater curtain.

In his catalogue essay, Maurand makes much of such imagery and attempts to tease out the presumed meanings still life elements had for Manet, presenting him as a highly theoretical artist as well as a master of his chosen medium. Maurand's thesis makes for interesting, if not wholly convincing, reading. There's no doubt that Manet, the quintessential Parisian, was intelligent, well-educated, sophisticated, and thoughtful, but Maurand's conception of him as a lover of arcane subtexts and obsessed by iconographic messages is difficult to swallow. He goes on at particular length about Manet's 1868 portrait of the writer Zachary Astruc (seen in Paris, but not in Baltimore), interpreting it as a diagrammatic illustration of Platonic categories. The picture is notoriously uncomfortable, even awkward—it's simply not in the same league as the nearly contemporaneous portrait of Zola—and Maurand seems to deter-

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mined to resolve these problematic qualities through an explication of the painting's presumed relationship to Platonist thought. I can't say that I found it very edifying. A more temperate, and much more enlightening, essay by Henri Loyrette, the director of the Musée d'Orsay, sets Manet's still life painting in the context of the modern development of the genre. Loyrette even suggests subtly that he is less than fully convinced by his colleague's assertions. "After its long adherence to monotonously repeated comments on pure painting," Loyrette writes,

> criticism plunged with all the eagerness of long-curbed appetite into the interpretation (and often overinterpretation) of works whose iconography had been long neglected. This was a beneficial process that yielded a number of thrilling analyses, but too often forgot about the "painting" in the name of "image" only. Truth, evidently, lies somewhere in between.

The visual evidence of "Manet: The Still-Life Paintings" tips the balance more toward "painting" than toward "image," which is not to say that any of it appears mindless or arbitrary. But it is clear that whatever meanings Manet ascribed to his chosen subject matter, whatever associations such objects as—say—his close friend and sister-in-law Berthe Morisot's fan and violets may have had for him, the pictures he made of such objects are compelling because of their masterly celebration of the visual, rather than because of their hidden meanings. And in visiting the exhibition, no matter how hard an attentive viewer attempts to concentrate on art historical issues or iconography or context, I suspect that it will be the potency of "pure painting" that will triumph, in the end. Decode the significance of the revealing images and titles that Manet chose to include in his portrait of Zola, by all means. Ponder why they are presented as they are. But don't forget to notice, as you do, how tightly knit the portrait is, how the fan of pamphlets responds to the angular drawing in the Japanese screen, how these zig-zags ring changes on the writer's pose. Notice, too, how the tension of this organizing drawing, like that between the tender pastels at the periphery of the picture and the opaque blacks at the center, helps to make Zola himself seem particularly alert and introspective. Or simply give yourself over to the amazing "portrait" of a melon, painted about 1880, from the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, a near-abstraction constructed out of a complex spherical form in taupes and greens, centered against broad divisions of gray and black. Then there's the 1880 pile of peaches from a private collection and the bunch of asparagus, from the same year, from the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, and much more—all of it definitely worth an excursion to Baltimore.

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Four poems by Rainer Maria von Rilke

translated & with an introduction by Martin Greenberg

In trying to keep in the English to the rhymed metrical regularity of these four poems, I have had to supply words of my own on occasion, to fill out a line or make a rhyme. That is a dangerous business, putting your own words into the mouth of a great poet. The *Mitgefühl* ("feeling-with") that can spring up between a poet and translator may mitigate such presumption. The splendid translations of Rilke by Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebman aim right for his imaginative originality without interference from the requirements of rhyme and metrical regularity. The present translations may lose in that respect; I offer them as giving something of the overall feel and swing of Rilke's poems, of his voice playing off against the traditional voice of German poetry, which is close to that of English poetry. Matthew Arnold in his essay on Heine speaks of "the German paste" in the composition of English, with the result that German poetry sounds so much like, and French unlike. But Rilke is also light, subtle, intensely conscious in the French way.

Rilke's note, sounded early in "Autumn Day," is that of loneliness—Auden called him "the Santa Claus of loneliness." It isn't solitude. Solitude is ancient, has the feeling of communing with a higher world. Loneliness seems to be a modern invention, wanders the streets down here. There is loneliness in "The Panther" too, but touched with fear. The last lines seem to open a pit at your feet. The poem belongs among the best evocations of animalness: with the horse "who saith among the trumpets 'Ha, Ha!' and smelleth the battle afar off"; with Christopher Smart's cat Jeoffrey: "For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest. For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion."

"Leda" is a brilliant, amusing take on the old story. Of course you think at once of Yeats. His "Leda" is grand, with quattrocento painting, Aeschylus, Homer behind it. Feathered Jove is "glorious." Troy falls, Agamemnon dies. Was Leda raised up to god-like knowledge, the poem asks. But Rilke's god appears from nowhere. He is needy. The beauty of the swan flusters him. He doesn't master Leda, she masters him. He doesn't raise her up, she draws him down. Changed into an earthly swan, he delights in his feathers. He touches you.

Rilke in these poems is strictly of this world. Art is his religion. The marble torso of the Apollo poem, turning its searchlight on you in the last two lines, discovers your untruth to yourself: you've got to change your life. After a century of psychology, this has a canting sound. Until its conclusion, the "Apollo," like the "Panther," is one of Rilke's exact, prayerful observations of *die Dinge* ("things") in which object and observer become one. To give the full Auden quotation:

> And Rilke whom *die Dinge* bless,
> The Santa Claus of loneliness.

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Herbsttag

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr gross.
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,
und auf den Fluren lass die Winde los.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;
gib ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage
die letzte Süsse in den schweren Wein.

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

Archaïscher Torso Apollos

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben ändern.

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Autumn day

Lord, it was much, the summer: but it's time now.
Lay down your shadow on the stone sun dial
and let the winds run loose upon the meadow.

Command the last fruits to be round and ripe;
allow them two days' more meridional warmness,
hurry them along into their fullness,
and with last sweetness load the heavy grape.

Who's got no house now, houseless he'll remain.
Who's all alone, he'll be alone still longer,
sit up late, read awhile, write a long letter,
and growing restless, walk out in the rain
and blowing leaves, down this street, that street, or another.

Archaic torso of Apollo

We never knew his extraordinary head,
with swelling stone eyeballs. Yet even broken,
his torso still glows like a lighted lantern
in which his gaze, damped down, not out, not dead,

keeps burning on. Or else the breast's bent bow
could never dazzle you, nor yet a smile run
ruffling through the loins' slight subtle flexion
to that midpoint from which ourselves we sow.

Or else the stone would be a stump, cut off
beneath the shoulders' clear transparent drop,
and wouldn't glisten like a wild beast's coat;

and wouldn't, breaking through the outlines of itself,
glitter like a star: for in it no least part
but finds you out. You've got to change your life.

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Leda

Als ihn der Gott in seiner Not betrat,
erschrak er fast, den Schwan so schön zu finden;
er liess sich ganz verwirrt in ihm verschwinden.
Schon aber trug ihn sein Betrug zur Tat,

bevor er noch des unerprobten Seins
Gefühle prüfte. Und die Aufgetane
erkannte schon den Kommenden im Schwane
und wusste schon: er bat um Eins,

das sie, verwirrt in ihrem Widerstand,
nicht mehr verbergen konnte. Er kam nieder,
und halsend durch die immer schwächre Hand

liess sich der Gott in die Geliebte los.
Dann erst empfand er glücklich sein Gefieder
und wurde wirklich Schwan in ihrem Schoss.

Der Panther

Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, dass er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein grosser Wille steht.

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sicht lautlos auf—.Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille—
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.

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Leda

When in his need the god surprised the swan,
its beauty almost scared him, he found, ravished—
a good deal flustered, into it he vanished.
His shamming had already led him on

to doing before he'd had time even to test
the feelings of his new, all untried state.
And she, all openness, already guessed
who it was coming in the swan, knew that

the thing he asked of her her dazed resistance
could no longer hide from him. A swoop,
and his neck butting through her hands' weak hindrance,

the god unloosed himself into love's grip.
Then feeling in his feathers for the first time gladness,
the god became a real swan in her lap.

The panther

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

From bars forever going past, his gaze
so jaded's grown there's no more it can hold.
To him a thousand bars are what there is,
bars only, and behind the bars no world.

The paws' soft fall and heavy limbs' loose swing
as in the tightest circles he turns round,
is like strength dancing round some central thing
inside of which a great will sits benumbed.

Except that now and then you see the curtain
of the pupils in dead silence rise—
an image enters, passes through the shoulders' tight-drawn
stillness to the heart, and dies.

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Theater

London & New York

by Mark Steyn

During one of the many adjournments in the 1999 presidential impeachment trial, my colleague David Frum and I corralled a liberal columnist of some prominence and went off to share a decaf latte. Frum wanted to know why no stellar media leftie had as yet turned on the president, as the right did on Nixon. Our companion ummed and ahhed and tried various sophisticated tacks before lamely concluding, "Well, in the end he's our guy, and we'll stick with him."

They stuck with him, but in what sense was he "their" guy? His most prominent critic on the left, Christopher Hitchens, pointed out that Mr. Clinton's "personal lapses" were all of a piece with his general betrayal of liberal principles—on welfare, gays, the cynical bombing of Third World countries, etc. In other words, aside from more Republicans in Congress, the Governors' Mansions, and the State Houses, what exactly did the left get in return for sticking with their guy through his many "lapses"? For pointing this out, Hitchens was treated by his etiquette-obsessed liberal media colleagues like a chap who'd farted at a vicarage tea-party. It is a woeful comment on the American left that the most sustained objection to President Clinton should come from an English public schoolboy.

For a while, it looked as if Britain might be heading the same grim way. Traditionally, the country's political culture has operated in a spirit of "bipartisanship" more robust than the genteel types of Washington could imagine. To take an example from the John Major years, a Tory "family values" MP was found to be sharing a French hotel room with another man, claiming he did so only to economize and that they had slept back to back. When a Conservative Fleet Street paper is forced to choose between "sticking with" a Conservative Government's "Back To Basics" campaign or sending its finest hacks across the channel to photograph the bed in question under the gleeful headline "Back To Back To Basics," it's no contest: their admirably "bipartisan" viciousness wins every time. The "New Labour" Government, however, seemed to flummox potential critics; its devotion to spin, image, and permanent campaigning is so transparent that to complain about it seems to miss the point. For the wretched mediocrities who comprise Britain's allegedly radical stand-up circuit, it was easier to carry on attacking now marginalized Tory figures, as if the Thatcher years had never ended.

But political satire is always better when the subject is being targeted by its own side, and finally a couple of good old Labour lefties have had enough. *Feelgood*, at London's Hampstead Theatre, takes its title from "the feelgood factor"—the priority Tony Blair and his advisors give to maintaining public contentment. The play's director, Max Stafford-Clark, ran for what seemed an eternity the Royal Court Theatre as a bastion of leftist orthodoxy. His author,

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Alistair Beaton, is a comedy writer of "Old Labour" persuasions: he and I worked on various BBC shows together over the years, and he was always going on about the need for comedy that was dangerous, that lived on the cutting edge, etc., which almost always turned out to mean another lame crack about Thatcher. But four years of smiling Tony have taken their toll on Beaton, and together he and Stafford-Clark have skewered the grinning vacuousness of the Blairite hierarchy in a way that few conservatives would have been able to do.

The play is far from perfect—the first act takes its time to warm up—but its eerily accurate atmosphere—the tone of Tone—is at times quite brilliant. Much of it is little more than the teensiest tweaking of the truth: in 1994, Mr. Blair's shadow cabinet trooped in to his hotel room to be informed that he'd decided to ditch Clause 4, the party's longstanding commitment to industrial nationalization. Philip Gould, Tony's focus-group guru, was in the room, but the Labour leader didn't want his cabinet to know about Mr. Gould's role in the decision and so made him hide in the closet. In Beaton's play, a prime ministerial gagwriter is, in similar fashion, always being hustled into the en suite bathroom—which, if anything, is somewhat less fantastical.

Feelgood is set at a party conference—the annual equivalent of America's conventions—and opens with a smooth party fixer, Eddie (Henry Goodman), in his hotel bedroom-cum-command-post working on a "spontaneous, from-the-heart" speech for his prime minister, referred to here as DL, which, in the course of the play, stands for Divine Light or Dreadfully Lightweight, or just plain Diddums. Tony Blair likes to plan his spontaneous, from-the-heart appearances very carefully: his most famous—the anguished, lump-in-the-throat salute to Diana as "the People's Princess"—was actually his second comment on the morning of her death, after rewrite had been called in. As the success of that slogan demonstrated, the prime minister has made a specialty of sing-song catchphrases even Mr. Clinton might balk at: the prototype was for his law-and-order policy, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime," which sounds vaguely as if it were stolen from some long-ago soap powder ad ("Tough on grime, tough on the causes of grime"). In *Feelgood*, Eddie has just come up with the prime minister's latest slogan: "a job culture, not a yob culture"—which is so cringe-makingly vapid it wouldn't surprise me if Mr. Blair appropriated it.

Eddie is suitably pleased at this, but down on the conference floor things are going awry. The wily spinner uses his cellphone to talk "the chair" through the crisis—rather as if the amateur's somehow been left at the controls of a plane and has to be talked down. But, inevitably, the line cuts out, the conference vote goes against the leadership, and, just as Eddie is figuring out how to neutralize the evening news bulletins, a ditsy Labour peer wanders in with even worse news. George (Nigel Planer) is the Minister for Cabinet Co-ordination—exactly the kind of hollow non-job to which Mr. Blair in his modernizing zeal is partial: he dislikes Britain's traditional ministerial titles (Lord Privy Seal, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) and is forever substituting ones which, to his ears, sound more thrusting and with-it, if only in their meaninglessness. Unfortunately, George has a bit of a problem. Entrusted with government policy on GM (genetically modified) crops, he thought he'd do himself a good turn and use his insider knowledge on his country estate. He's secretly planted GM hops, with the result that the nation's "lager louts" are now developing not the traditional English beer gut but female breasts. If this seems a little far-fetched, it should be pointed out that Beaton has performed the merest genetic splicing of a couple of recent news stories: on the one hand, GM foods have been hugely controversial throughout Europe, on the other, there have been reports linking the dramatic decline in the average sperm count (the "normal" sperm count is now a third of what it was fifty years ago),

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rapidly shrinking testicle size, and the appearance of pronounced breasts in men to estrogen from contraceptive pills finding its way into the municipal water supply. In such a world, the satirist's job is not an easy one, but Beaton has the prime minister's politically neutered gagwriter throwing in a crack about these new hermaphrodites as "The Third Way."

Beaton has stumbled on a nice idea here: that the feminization of the culture embodied by the ascendancies of Blair and Clinton may not be just metaphorical but actual. But he doesn't really run with it, and in the second act his all too genuine anger at the hijacking of the party results in some somewhat po-faced harangues on the subject of political principles. Even here, though, the Gogolesque touches are a surprise from a man who has hitherto made his living from one-liners. A better dramatist would have dug more deeply into this theme, but, then again, the Blair project is so shallow perhaps you're better off with someone who glides deliriously on the surface. It's also the case, sadly, that the most skilled artists in the theater seem pathologically incapable of engaging with the "real world" in any meaningful sense. David Hare's 1983 play *The Secret Rapture*, one of the earliest of the author's many indictments of Thatcherism, has just been revived at the Salisbury Playhouse, and its smug disdain for the social dynamics that produced the conservative revival in Britain seems more ignorant than ever.

A slightly more perplexing example is Deborah Warner's production of *Medea* (at the Queen's). Longtime readers may recall that I have been a great admirer of Miss Warner, especially her productions of *Don Giovanni*, *Electra*, and *The Wasteland*, the last two starring her onstage alter-ego Fiona Shaw. Anyone who attended *The Wasteland* in New York would come away concluding that both director and actress enjoy pared down, unfussy productions that allow the drama to shine in clear, bold ways. When I saw *Electra* some years ago at the RSC's aptly named studio theatre, the Pit, I returned from intermission and, ambling across the stage (seating is on two sides of the "performance space") in conversation with a friend, I accidentally trod in the trough of water that more or less comprised the production's entire set. Fortunately, some obliging stagehands were able to clear it up or I would have spoiled what was the second half's principal visual image. At the Queen's, it is, alas, impossible for careless theatergoers to demolish the set; it would be a helpful start.

Euripides, whose lawyers urgently need to contact Miss Warner's producers, wrote *Medea* as a revenge tragedy: his protagonist is driven first to act against her husband's new family, and then against her own children, slaughtering them because they are his, too. It is a melancholy fact that one does not have to search far for contemporary echoes of this tale. *The New York Post* had a story a few months back of an estranged boyfriend returning to the former love nest and, after an argument with his ex, hurling their baby from the apartment window. But, of course, Medea is not a welfare mother from the Bronx. When Jason leaves her for an opportunistic marriage to Creon's daughter, she is sufficiently human to feel doubly abandoned, as a rejected wife and as a foreigner in a strange land. But she is also a granddaughter of Helios, god of the sun, with witch's powers and a bloody track record. Not a lot of those in the projects.

Miss Warner's production, first seen at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, declares itself immediately. Euripides's Corinth is a concrete jungle, presumably some sort of gargantuan housing estate such as one would find on the outskirts of, say, Limerick. There is a paddling pool, and Medea's boys play with plastic machine guns. The grown-ups wear headscarves, sweat pants, and anoraks, as they do in almost any provincial town in the British Isles. The radio plays pop music. The confidence that Misses Warner and Shaw demonstrated in *Electra* has been replaced by the worst kind of meretricious distraction. The trouble with

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going heavy on the contemporary parallel lies in the details that never quite fit. Take Jason, the Argonaut with the roving eye. Yes, he's an arrogant clod who can't understand why his missus insists on taking his decision to trade up personally. But Jonathan Cake's English rugger-club parvenu with designer stubble makes nonsense of Miss Warner's "concept." In what circumstances would such a fellow have a wife and kids in a housing project? Certainly none foreseen by Euripides.

If Miss Warner's intention was to use the play to ennoble the plight of the single mum, she has instead only trivialized the grandeur of Euripides. The text—in the Kenneth McLeish/Frederic Raphael translation—fares very badly, slashed to a brisk ninety minutes, with lines fractured at random, often in disregard for basic continuity, and the choral passages parceled out to individual players in bite-sized phrases, even sometimes single words. Embodying the mismatch between play and production, Fiona Shaw alternates between passages of great weepin' and a-wailin'—curiously unmoving, in stark contrast to her Electra—and the trashiest bits of business with pop guns, funny hats, and burning teddy bears. To mime her act of poison, she puts on joke-shop specs and uses a toy stethoscope and an oversized hypodermic. Perhaps there is a logic behind the gimmicks; perhaps Miss Warner, by relying on Fisher-Price props, is trying to tell us that the real children here—wilful, immature, selfish—are Medea and Jason themselves. You can certainly make the case, in a drama-school exercise sort of way. But the upshot is that, having junked the artificial conventions of Greek drama, Miss Warner has simply substituted some garish stylizations of her own. As for Miss Shaw, her attempts at working-class body language emphasize the most unpleasant aspect of this production: its condescension.

If you were around in 431 B.C. or at any of the more traditional revivals, you'll know that the final image of the play is of Medea ascending in the Sun God's chariot with her murdered children, borne aloft in triumph as her faithless husband rages below. In this production, the deus ex machina fails to show—another jest of the gods—and Medea, in a blood-spattered plastic mac, lurches about the paddling pool with Jason. It is a nerve-tingling moment of theater, hinting that this awful couple's self-obsession has already absorbed even the death of their children. It is an arresting thought, corroborated by any number of stories from the Sunday tabloids. But it is not tragic, and it is not Euripides. Misses Warner and Shaw have at one level done something extraordinary: they have brought a 2500-year old Greek tragedy to the West End for a commercial run. Imagine that on Broadway, and you'll appreciate how much they must have wanted to do this play. Yet the resulting jumble reveals their misunderstanding not only of Euripides but also of the real world to which they wish to make him "relevant." The production is, in that sense, a terrible double failure.

In New York, meanwhile, we are in yet another quiet patch of this abysmal non-season. Not only is it impossible to imagine *Medea* on Broadway, it's difficult to foresee circumstances in which a local version of *Feelgood* could triumph. So instead one takes good news where one can find it, and at the Marquis there's a very pleasant surprise in the shape of the country singer Reba McEntire. I don't know how Barry and Fran Weissler, producers of *Annie, Get Your Gun*, persuaded Miss McEntire to take the role of Annie Oakley; I've no idea what they're paying her, and, whatever it is, I still can't see how it can be worth her while. But nonetheless here she is in her Broadway debut and doing just a lovely job. A star performance is, almost by definition, a rougher performance. A great actress can immerse herself in a role, but, when a famous personality takes it on, the role also has to immerse itself in the star. Miss McEntire's performance and her readings of the songs are very obviously not as thought through as those of her predecessor, Ber-

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nadette Peters. Yet, whatever the sum of the parts, the whole is so much more satisfying. Miss McEntire makes much less of a meal of the show than Miss Peters did, and the result is that *Annie*, unlike *Kiss Me, Kate* and the other current revivals, is much closer to the genuine ease of a Golden Age musical. She is a cute, bouncy redhead—and, with Gwen Verdon's death, Broadway can certainly use one—but her most appealing characteristic is the southern vowels and country character she brings to Irving Berlin's score. Miss McEntire has made a lot of money singing terrible one-hook country songs, and it is a joy to hear her voice applied to something worthwhile. I still feel, as I said when this revival opened, that Peter Stone, the librettist brought in to retool the book and give the Indians all the punchlines, has simply filleted it to meet the requirements of our times. But at least now it has a genuine star performance at its heart. Reba McEntire is not Ethel Merman, but then neither was Bernadette Peters. Golden Age musical comedy demands a performance of a certain size—that's why *Kiss Me, Kate* feels so underpowered—and this season, if only for a while, at least this show has one.

The same cannot be said of Rosie O'Donnell, the new Cat in the Hat brought in to rescue *Seussical: The Musical* at the Richard Rodgers. Famed both for her role as spokesperson of the Million Mom March for gun control and for the subsequent revelation that her own kids' bodyguard wanders around suburban Connecticut packing heat, Miss O'Donnell would no doubt have had political objections to playing Annie Oakley. All one can say then is that she and this misbegotten doozical musical *Seussical* deserve each other. Rosie is friendly, confident and utterly undistinguished. On television and on her Christmas albums, she sings with her guest stars in what, in small doses, is a charmingly amateurish kind of way. It would be possible to pick a revival or devise a revue in which her limited skills would shine, but to ask her to persuade audiences of the merits of a new score not overburdened with catchiness is to test her skills way beyond breaking point. If *Annie, Get Your Gun* proves that sometimes it's not a bad idea for Broadway's barren firmament to import stars from adjacent galaxies, *Seussical* reminds us that Reba McEntire is very much the exception to the rule. In fairness to Rosie, the problem is the show itself. A musical based on Dr. Seuss is too obviously one of those "Hey, what a great idea!" ideas, and, even if there were something in it, signing Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty to write it almost guarantees a misfire. Ahrens and Flaherty are the preeminent writers of what's fast becoming Broadway's speciality, the non-hit hit—such as *Ragtime*, the kind of tasteful professional adaptation that avoids doing anything wrong but doesn't do much right, either. Neither Ahrens nor Flaherty seems to have much sense of song structure, and their principal accomplishment here is to introduce speed bumps into the good Doctor's relentless jingles, at times rendering them almost as obscure and meandering as *Ragtime*'s faux recitative.

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Music

Lessons from masters

by Jay Nordlinger

Marilyn Horne, the great mezzo-soprano, is retired now, but far from inactive: she is the head of the Marilyn Horne Foundation, a group dedicated to the nurturing of young singers, with a particular eye to the song recital, which Horne and her cohorts fear is dying. The foundation is what the first President Bush might have called a "point of light." In the music world, there is probably none brighter.

Among the foundation's activities is an annual series of master classes. These are, roughly, public lessons, in which teachers —"masters"—listen to several students and then comment, not only for the benefit of the individual students, but for the benefit of the audience, seated before them. A master class, done well, is an unusually satisfying experience.

Certainly, the most famous master class ever—or rather, series of master classes—was that given by Maria Callas at the Juilliard School in 1971–72. Unfortunately, this series is best known now through Terrence McNally's play *Master Class*, which is a soap-opera-ish excursion into Callas's (admittedly, soap-opera-ish) life. In reality, those classes were superb explorations of singing, with Callas at her most brilliant, most tart, most Callas-like. In one session, the diva chastised a poor student who had attacked a note in a grossly histrionic way. "But, Madame," protested the student, "it's a cry of despair." "No, it isn't," said Callas, "it's a B flat." This remains one of the most useful comments about music-making ever made.

It's hard to guess who will make a good master-class teacher, and who will not. Some of the best musicians really can't convey what they know; some rather lesser musicians can, luminously. A teacher has to decide any number of things: how critical to be, how gentle; how detailed to get with the student, how general to keep it, for the audience; how much to demonstrate, when to hold off. In my view, a master-class teacher fails when he concentrates on the students to the exclusion of the greater audience. The students, of course, are trying to shine and impress, but they should be almost irrelevant. They should be mere tools —springboards—for public instruction. In other words, the teacher's primary duty is to the hundreds (or dozens or whatever), rather than to the few onstage.

And the teacher should not be afraid to show off, to be the star of the show. Self-effacement is a fault here. The "master" is the one we have come to see, to hear, to learn from. I once heard Leontyne Price begin a class, "Now, the first thing you have to understand is that this is not about me; it's about these young artists." Thank God, it wasn't—it was about Price. And everyone got his money's worth.

At their best, master classes leave you with a glow, an almost religious uplift, a feeling of having witnessed a kind of missionary work. There is little so bracing and

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inspiring as excellent teaching—the kind that sticks.

The Horne Foundation provided such teaching with its three classes this year, held in January at the Juilliard School. They were conducted by the retired mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett, Horne herself, and James Levine, artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera and arguably the most important force in singers' lives worldwide.

Verrett was a widely admired singer, with a flexible and memorable instrument. She was celebrated for her Verdi, and, more particularly, for her Eboli in that composer's *Don Carlo*. She has taught at the University of Michigan since 1996. Marilyn Horne, introducing her, couldn't help remarking, "This lady is looking damn good." So she is.

Before bringing out the first student, Verrett gave a little speech about "passing the baton" to the next generation, and "giving back" to the profession, and so on in that platitudinous, somewhat corny vein. But, you know: it's true. All of the clichés about teaching are right and just. Verrett, Horne, and the rest got their techniques, outlooks, and, in a way, careers from the generations that preceded them, and they are now, indeed, doing unto others, and obviously deriving great satisfaction from the process.

That first student offered Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" from the *Rückertlieder*, a most curious piece for a master class, especially for the start of one. This may be, of the millions of songs, the most sublime ever composed. You wonder whether a student ought to be allowed to try it. A student pianist, by way of comparison, might as well assay the final sonata of Beethoven. We often hear that only a person with gray hair, and a fund of spirituality, should get near this work. It would be silly to be rigid about it—people mature differently—but it would be equally silly to be cavalier.

When the young lady had finished, Verrett said, "What a beautiful voice"—which a) could be true, and b) is something to note when a student has not performed a piece very well. And it can be encouraging to the singer. Verrett—as she would with every participant—demanded that the student explain what the song meant to her. So would Horne and Levine, when their turns came. Verrett also laid great stress on the expression on the singer's face—as would Horne and Levine. I confess to finding this last puzzling. For my taste, there is all too much facial expression in singing, and not enough real, musical expression. All season long, I see singers—particularly young ones—pantomiming and mugging their way through songs, as though this music were meant to be acted out, rather than expressed musically. But all three teachers were insistent.

Verrett gave solid, and simple, advice: mark the difference between double and single consonants. Make sure that thoughts are connected, even through rests, when there is no sound. If a line goes up in pitch, it is not necessarily desirable for the voice to grow with it. And "here is something forever and ever" (a real wake-up call in a master class): you don't have to observe the value of a note strictly (since when do singers—notoriously loose—have to be reminded of *that*?); you do what is most convenient to the breath. The Verrett students always sounded better at the end of their time onstage, the result, surely, of a mixture of things: good instruction, close proximity to a major singer and personality, and simply being more relaxed, less nervous.

At one point, Verrett admonished, "Don't scoop," then quickly added, "I'm not here to give lessons"—which brings up a problem of the master class: how much should a teacher attempt of a technical nature? Should he confine himself to remarks on interpretation, or should he descend to the vocal nitty-gritty? This must be a matter of judgment, made on the fly. I, personally, would have liked to hear from Verrett how this or that singer could improve his intonation—a question quite far from the loftily philosophical, but absolutely critical.

The diva-professor was full of charm, as

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when she said to one mezzo, "Don't dig down into your chest, dear—I did that at the beginning of my career, and I had to get out of it." Before the student left the stage, Verrett made a further, physical point. The young woman had been holding her arms in a peculiar way during moments of tension. Said Verrett, "I tell you not to embarrass you or anything, but I had a funny thing I did with my thumbs. No one told me—I noticed in pictures. You have an arm thing. Best to escape the habit now."

Verrett also engaged in some demonstration, however sparingly. In that still-distinctive voice, she showed how to exit a note in a particular way—a way impossible, or nearly impossible, to describe in words. We tend to cluck at teachers who (for example) shove piano students off benches. But sometimes, a phrase briefly played, or sung, can be worth a thousand words, or many thousands. In fact, those thousands may be pathetically futile.

The final student of the day had the temerity—or the gumption or the smarts—to sing "O don fatale," the signature aria from Verrett's signature role. It was a rare opportunity, and the student was no doubt right to take it—if only for the pleasure of saying, years from now, "I was coached by Verrett on this, you know."

She has a lot to impart, Shirley Verrett; and she does it with a touching enthusiasm, even a zeal. I had the impression that she is just as excited—just as involved, just as serious, just as animated—without a master-class audience, in the privacy and relative obscurity of her studio in Ann Arbor.

Marilyn Horne is famously a fine teacher, a musician who can explain what she does. For her class, students had prepared songs in English. This language of ours presents special difficulties, and Horne has long been a master of them. No one sings in English better than she.

Horne can teach because she is a brainy singer, not merely a natural (although she is that, without question). In a master class, she exhibits firmness, good humor, and devotion to the high standards of music. Suffusing everything is her renowned personality, which brims with charisma. Whether she waves hello, or coughs, or throws her head back and laughs, she is, somehow, charismatic; she can't help it. She is also a little earthy, strongly opinionated, and a bit of a clown—a thoroughly American diva, as distinct from an old-style European one. Before summoning her first student at Juilliard, she said, "Let's do some work and have some fun"—a kind of summing-up of Horne herself.

She asked that first student to introduce her piece, and when the student was a bit muted, Horne said, "Speak up, please"—here was a teacher who covers all the bases. (Horne herself has an extraordinary speaking voice. It is almost shockingly clear, and very Middle American, coming from the Pennsylvania heartland.) One by one, as the students appeared, whether they sang or talked, Horne asked for sharper diction, "more consonants"—"gimme lots of consonants." She convincingly related the texts to the music, and vice versa. In everything she did, she showed a positively uncanny ability to communicate, through words, gestures, and demonstration. She might have made an excellent conductor—something that can be said of very few singers.

A phrase that needs urgency should be "on the balls of its feet." A certain note should be soft, yes, but that softness should carry "an intensity, an energy." Another note should be held longer: "Stay on it, and don't spend half of it sliding [to the next note]." When a tenor cracked, she pointed at a glass and ordered, "Water!" She always took care to provide a leavening humor: "You see that the composer has done us the wonderful favor of giving us an *ee* vowel on that G!" Changing the dynamics in the score of an old, hymn-like chestnut, she shot the audience a look and quipped, "It ain't Mozart."

All these things—high and low, complex and simple—are likely to stay with those students, and with the "students" in the audience, too.

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And Horne did not neglect the accompanists. (The term "accompanist," by the way, has apparently gone out of favor. They are now called "collaborative artists"—a ghastly piece of political correctness that should be stamped out quickly. "Accompanist" is no pejorative: It was good enough for Franz Rupp, it was good enough for Gerald Moore, and it should be good enough for the "collaborative artists" of today.) Horne gave consistently good advice—even quite subtle advice—to the pianists. And she imparted something of a very practical nature: "When a singer or conductor or someone asks you to give a line [a line the singer is bungling], just bang it out. No finesse, no musicality. That's not called for here. Just bang it out!"

As the class progressed, I was conscious that Horne was teaching the students to sing . . . rather like Marilyn Horne. When she counseled a "lift" in the back of the vocal apparatus, producing a certain resonance, I thought, "Ah, that's the Horne spot, and the Horne sound." When she said, "I don't care if you gasp—you need air there," I was reminded that Horne would sometimes gasp—though, when she did it, it never seemed unmusical. When she instructed, "Get a good tank of air there," I couldn't help thinking, "That's exactly what *she* did: get a good tank of air. When writing about her, I might have said, 'She sang that passage with a good tank of air.'"

She did sing a little, in this master class—in odd snatches of demonstration. She was feeling awful: suffering from a cold, toddling along on a cane (she had been injured), recovering from laryngitis. So her willingness to demonstrate revealed a rare and refreshing lack of vanity. She did not fear to sound like a retired mezzo who was drained and sick. What she sounded like was . . . well, it was thrilling.

At one point, that cane slid to the floor. As she bent to pick it up, Horne said, "I always hated it when people dropped their canes during my recitals!" She continued, "I said to myself before coming here, 'You're really going to look like the dowager voice teacher.' And then it hit me: 'You *are* the dowager voice teacher!'"

In her two hours before the public, Horne showed a formidable understanding of the vocal enterprise. Everything she said had the force of rightness—not of opinion, no matter how interesting, but of rightness. And as good as this teaching was, she promised even better to come: "When James Levine does a master class, we all get religion."

That third and final class was to have been led by the legendary German bass-baritone Hans Hotter, whose ninety-second birthday it was. Hotter proved unable to travel, however, and Horne had to scramble for a replacement. She decided, as she put it, to "start at the top"—and, indeed, secured Levine.

He is one of the great talkers in music, an intellectual, as well as a naturally expressive musician. He is also a fine and frequent accompanist. To his session at Juilliard, the students brought German songs, or lieder, which Levine pronounced his favorite repertory, for its unending variety. His first student offered up Strauss's "Befreit"—which is too long a piece, in my opinion, for a master class. The first couple of pages might have sufficed for an hour or two of Levine's teaching (important though it may be to grasp the overall arc of the piece). A good golf instructor requires only a couple of swings. Master-class teachers err in letting students go on too long, allowing the experience to become something of a concert, when time is precious, and there is so much to discuss. (In addition, a teacher must decide when to move off a problem that the student is not solving—again, keeping the audience in mind.)

As it happened, after this first student sang "Befreit," Levine had her immediately move on to another song. There was maybe double the amount of singing in this class than in the preceding two. But what Levine said, inevitably, hit the mark. "What bothers me," he confided to the "Befreit" student, "is subtle: I wish I could know where this is

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going." This was not a matter of tempo or breathing; it was an interpretive phenomenon, a psychological stance, an intuition in every phrase of the work as a whole (so much for my wanting to cut the poor girl off). Further, "I need to understand your point of view," said Levine. "I need to hear what you would have me, the listener, understand."

One thing that surprised me about Levine's class was his repeated emphasis on the subjective: the individual's taste, his own conception, his own relationship to the piece, and so forth. Generally, I regard Levine as a bulwark against this sort of thing: against emotionality, against the imposition of personality, against "Let it all hang out, baby." Some of us, for example, might regard the little song "Mein!" from *Die schöne Müllerin* as, not so much the ecstatic declaration of a lover, or would-be lover, as a burbly Schubert piece in D major. Shades of Callas there. But Levine insisted on the importance—even the preeminence—of the personal. He did, however, caution (about Wolf's great "Kennst du das Land"), "This music doesn't need to be given extra drama; it has enough within itself." This is more the Levine I am familiar with.

Some songs are suited to certain singers, he noted, and others, not. "Which [of two lieder] do you like better?," he asked one student. Before the student could answer, Levine said, "The second song likes *you* better." There are thousands of songs, he went on, so "set aside the ones that don't speak to you, and take up the ones that do." Flip through the texts. If one leaves you cold, and another one makes your heart leap—go with the latter. It will show in the performance. What could be plainer?

I would venture to add that a true musician—Levine, say—can perform any music well, and that an audience should not be able to guess, necessarily, what he happens to cherish personally and what he does not. Indeed, weak-minded musicians tend to misperform the music they especially love, maiming it with rubato and ego. I enjoy thinking of the late pianist Malcolm Frager, who once said, when sitting down to rehearse a concerto, "As I am not a Beethoven specialist, I think we should take this at the proper tempo."

Levine put neatly an eternal paradox of singing: "Find a way not to hold everything in, and not to push it out, either." To one baritone, he said, "Resist the temptation to have it come out tight—oxygenate yourself." Over and over, he stressed that the most important aspect of lieder-singing is communication: "Sing directly to the people. Let there be no gap between what you intend and what they hear." And "always be comfortable in—think in—the language of the song. Allow no translation in your head." In oratorio, we "present," and in opera, we play a role; but in song, we communicate intimately—and "everything that you do that's presentational takes away from the song."

The maestro-pianist engaged in a little demonstrating of his own, pushing one accompanist off the bench to make a point about Schubert's "Gretchen am Spinnrade." Impressively verbal as he is, Levine could not have done better than that.

Above all, he—as always, whether on the podium or elsewhere—communicated his own, amazing love of music, his ability to remain excited about it, deep into adulthood. When a singer and pianist came to a shift of key in a Schubert song, Levine broke in, wide-eyed, marveling, "What about *that*? *That's* a big harmonic event." No child was ever more delighted about a discovery, or rediscovery, in music. This is a rare and significant thing among professionals.

Indeed, this entire series did the work of serving music—of keeping a flame, endowing a heritage. Good for Marilyn Horne. Seldom has a singer had so great a career; and seldom has one fashioned so useful a post-career.

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The egghead's "Gioconda"

by Patrick J. Smith

The composer Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) was of mixed Italian-German parentage, but his life and career was spent largely in Berlin. In his lifetime, he was famous throughout Europe and the United States as a formidable technician of the piano and one of the great virtuosos in piano history. Like many other virtuosos of his time (and especially his idol Franz Liszt), Busoni created portmanteau piano pieces, many of which, especially under the rubric "Bach-Busoni," exist in recitals to this day. Busoni was renowned as a pianist, but he wished to be known as a composer. His compositional oeuvre, however, is spotty. Aside from the portmanteau works, it includes several operas and an outsized piano concerto, which in its romantic pretensions is risible but enormous fun, combining Lisztian rodomontade and a final choral uplift. His one-act parody opera, *Arlecchino*, however, with its debt to the *commedia dell'arte* (the Italian side of Busoni), is a gem of wit and benevolent satire.

Busoni strove for a great compositional statement, and after waffling through several ideas for a grand opera settled on the German obsession: Faust. He knew he was entering on a crowded field, peopled musically by Gounod, Berlioz and even Liszt (whose symphonic treatment of the subject probably came closest musically to the towering example of Goethe). Busoni staked his claim by insisting that *his* version did not follow Goethe, but harked back to the medieval puppet plays that were the genesis of the idea. Indeed, the very disjointed and episodic treatment he devised (he was his own librettist) seems to support that contention, as does the fact that, in his treatment, Faust, not Mephistopheles, takes the central position in controlling his destiny, with the devil becoming simply Faust's wily lackey. Busoni's Faust, moreover, is not heroic, but a coward and a manipulator who has already seduced and abandoned someone before meeting Mephisto.

Busoni emphasized the centrality of Faust by writing the role for a baritone—no featherheaded tenors here!—and transforming the devil into a character tenor with a fearsomely high tessitura. There is little doubt that Busoni looked to Liszt, whose conception of Mephisto was made up, not of his own themes, but of distortions of the themes of others.

Faust was on Busoni's mind as early as 1906, and he began serious work on it in 1910, completing the libretto in 1914. He died in 1924, leaving the ending unfinished, and his pupil Phillip Jarnach completed it for the premiere in Dresden in 1925. From that time on, *Doktor Faust* has been the darling of the intelligentsia. In part, this is owing to the fact that Busoni was highly esteemed as a scholar and thinker, but it is also because he created a work that deliberately left behind the boulevard delights of Gounod and the romantic flamboyance of Berlioz to confront the genius of Goethe

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himself—even if he disclaimed its parentage. Similarly, in a operatic world increasingly dominated by "popular" works such as those of Puccini and the veristic composers, *Doktor Faust* represented the continuation of the "uplifted" German tradition, in direct contradistinction from the grandiose works of Wagner, whose music and philosophy Busoni detested.

Other important German philosophical operas of the early twentieth century—Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina* and Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*—have never achieved the level of popularity that *Doktor Faust* has (though I consider both of them stronger works), and the only other German twentieth century opera to challenge its status is *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* by Busoni's pupil Kurt Weill. In the current *Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Antony Beaumont, who himself has provided an ending for the opera, claims it is "widely accepted as one of the outstanding operas of the twentieth century."

That claim, outside the fevered academic circles, is difficult to justify. The episodic nature of the libretto is a serious hindrance: almost a third of it is over before the bargain with the devil is struck, and a big chunk of it concerns Faust's relationship with the Duke and Duchess of Parma—he runs off with the latter on her wedding day—two stick figures of little interest. Busoni's finest dramatic inspiration was to set the climactic scene in a deserted street in winter. Faust finally accepts his end, puts down his dead child, and dies, bequeathing his unshakeable eternal will to the corpse. Out of it rises a young man (presumably the Future). Mephisto, in disguise as a Night Watchman (throughout the opera he appears in various disguises), comes up to the dead Faust and speaks (not sings) the famous final line of the opera: "Sollte dieser Mann verunglückt sein?"—"Has this man met with a misfortune?"

The fact that the last line is spoken is telling, since the central failure of the opera is its musicalization. With strong and effective music, the libretto could succeed, but Busoni's talents were of a far more restricted order. The best music lies in the passages up to the sealing of Faust's bargain; after that, the inspiration thins, becoming ever more threadbare. The last scene is as unsatisfying musically as that of another unfinished opera of the 1920s, Puccini's *Turandot*. It is interesting that, despite his denials, Busoni cannot escape the clutches of Goethe in his retelling of the story. Faust's soliloquy in the second scene ("Traum der Jugend") brings his character close to the Faust of the second part of Goethe's poem. Here, however, the musical underpinning is weak, and the great statement cannot carry the emotional weight that, for instance, Berlioz provided for his Faust in his soliloquy at a similar position in his work.

Some of the orchestral portions, notably the sarabande, do possess a flickering life, and Busoni's mind did impose a variety of patterns on the work. Given his interest in early music, Busoni used dance forms, counterpoint, and fugue to stitch together the disparate scenes, and this intellectualization of the material has always been an appealing feature of *Doktor Faust*. What is unfortunate, however, is that Busoni was working the same territory at approximately the same time as a greater German composer. Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, with its more thorough and musically inventive examination of how to make a dramatically viable operatic retelling, effectively obliterated Busoni's experiments (as Berg's work obliterated the *Wozzeck* of Manfred Gurlitt).

Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, then, is a classic example of a composer's reach far exceeding his grasp, but its accomplishments no less than the esteem in which it is held in Europe justify its being given a production at the Metropolitan Opera. I once called *Doktor Faust* "the egghead's *Gioconda*," and if Ponchielli's tuneful and addlebrained "Grand" opera still plays the Lincoln Center house—which it does—there is no reason why Busoni's opera should not. The production that made its Met debut on January 8 originated in Salzburg, at the 1999 festival.

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It was directed by Peter Mussbach, with sets by Erich Wonder, costumes by Andrea Schmidt-Futterer, and lighting by Konrad Lindenberg. The production was an additional obstacle to the opera's success.

It is mandatory in Europe for directors of opera and theater to impose a directorial "concept" on the work at hand, and critics are trained to deplore productions that seek to reproduce what the composer, librettist, or playwright intended. In older work especially, there has to be a contemporary spin put onto the story. In part, of course, this attitude derives from boredom with the work as it has been seen, but the attitude goes deeper: that a work of art is only a model and not a finished product—a model to be shaped by director and designer. This attitude extends to world premieres as well: Patrice Chéreau's setting of the last act of the completed *Lulu* at the Paris Opéra had nothing to do with what Berg intended.

What Mussbach decided to do with *Doktor Faust* was to give it a non-dramatic reading, highlighting the grotesque aspects of the libretto and downplaying the magic elements and the inherent drama. His tortured program note (another invariable feature of the "concept" production) about Faust's autistic journey inside his head (whatever that means) only accentuated the muddle. Thus Faust and Mephisto were seen as halves of a whole, both in trench coats and fedoras (the classic outfit of the European staging), with Faust looking like a concentration-camp victim until he as transformed into an aging hippie and with Mephisto in your basic black without any attempt at disguise. The first scene used some rolling railway cars to effect, but after that lassitude took over. The Parma scene was overpopulated with comic figures (derived from *Arlecchino*?). Faust is meant to conjure up visions of the past and to change day into night, but these were prosaically rendered as some kind of cabaret entertainment, and largely lost in the shuffle of bodies. The tavern scene, with its duelling Catholic and Protestant students (a choral episode clearly modelled on Berlioz, who did it better), was treated as a slapstick *commedia dell'arte* intermezzo. Admittedly, the risen child carrying a blooming branch in the final scene is not easy to bring off onstage today, but Mussbach didn't try. There is no child, and there is no dead Faust: he wanders into the ether upstage, and Mephisto is left to speak his line to emptiness. The empty stage, of course, is symbolic, but it is symbolic of more, for with the thinning-out of the music this non-dramatic approach is disastrous. The last hour and a half of the opera becomes a wasteland, to the detriment of whatever merits the score in fact possesses.

The cast was quite strong, with Robert Brubaker a winning Mephisto and Katarina Dalayman properly sensual as the Duchess. The large supporting cast also offered excellent work, and the conductor Philippe Auguin led a knowledgable performance, though one missed the dramatic authority that James Levine would have brought to the score (he withdrew at the last moment because of illness).

Yet the evening's success, such as it was, lay almost exclusively with the singing and acting of Thomas Hampson as Faust. This is a gruelling role—long and often vocally exposed—and given the circumstances of this production it would seem to be heroically difficult to bring off, since Faust more than ever has to be the emotional and histrionic center. Hampson as an artist is one of the finest of American singers, for the range of his musical interests, for the quality of his solid baritone, and for his cogent opinions, both written and spoken. He is at home in both opera and in lieder (of all kinds), and he welcomes challenges. All too often, however, there is a distanced quality about Hampson's performances, as if he stands apart from his performing self and silently admires the beauty of it all.

There was none of that in his Faust. It was totally centered on the character, and totally involved with the opera, and it was clear he believed that Busoni had written a masterpiece to be put across as powerfully as pos-

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sible to a Met audience. It was a pity he was not more strongly seconded by his director.

Concert note

Jean-Yves Thibaudet at
Carnegie Hall, New York. February 7, 2001

Distinguished among pianists in the world today is Jean-Yves Thibaudet, a Frenchman under forty and a specialist in the music of his country. He would no doubt bridle at being called a specialist—his repertory is sufficiently wide. But to play Debussy and Ravel well is no disgrace.

A student of Aldo Ciccolini (a quintessential French musician, despite the name), Thibaudet comes from that tradition, and exemplifies it. He devoted the first half of his program to Debussy's *Préludes*, Book II, an excellent test of French piano playing. In the first piece, "Brouillards" ("Fogs" or "Mists"), Thibaudet quickly achieved that French musical soup. There is, of course, a fine line between mush and distinct enough, and Thibaudet walks it admirably. He has a good sense of what notes should come out, and what notes should stay down, or blend in. We should really avoid using that awful and amorphous word "touch"—but Thibaudet has it. He tends to play on top of the keys, in the French manner, yet there is plenty of body in his playing. It is not weak, or dainty, or precious. He is also an expert pedaler, as all players of this music must be. (Pedaling is a neglected art.) So too, he is a superb colorist—as, again, any French player must be.

Thibaudet has an ample technique, in the sense of fingers, speed, accuracy. A couple of the preludes showed a real virtuosity. He also boasts a marvelous sense of rhythm, of dance. He did everything that Debussy requires, and Debussy, in this collection, requires a lot: diffidence, jazziness, a galaxy of unearthly sounds. This is an extremely tasteful pianist. He gives the impression of knowing a considerable amount about all sorts of things: art, philosophy, history. Some musicians are like this, and the quality is evident in their playing.

After intermission, Thibaudet turned his attention to Ravel and his *Miroirs*. The first item, "Noctuelles," had a fabulous clarity. A later item—"Une Barque sur l'océan"—was fantastically vivid: you could almost feel the salty mist on your face. "Alborado del gracioso," though, was a bit of a mess. It lacked definition and force. Strange that so common and iconic a piece should seem so insecure under Thibaudet's fingers. His arms tend to get a little tight, and he has a tendency to creep up on—to sit too close to—the keyboard, which further binds him. "Alborado" was downright poor; Thibaudet has no doubt played it far better in the past.

Concluding the printed program was Messiaen's "Regard de l'église d'amour," which ends the monumental *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*. Thibaudet played this piece with conviction, and it is obviously one that inspires him a great deal.

What to do for an encore, following a nearly unfollowable work? Thibaudet announced that, if anything, it had to be Wagner, a composer whom Messiaen revered. So Thibaudet performed Liszt's transcription of the "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde*. This is a travesty of a transcription, filled with (inadvertently) comical tremolos—a piano banger on a Mississippi River steamboat circa 1911 might have presented the "Liebestod" this way. And Thibaudet did some odd things with it, particularly as it concerned dynamics. He then offered a Duke Ellington piece, honoring the connection between France and jazz. Next came a Chopin waltz in E flat—probably Thibaudet's worst playing of the night. It was, in fact, bad playing: careless, robotic, even flippant. The pianist bade farewell with another jazz piece, something from Bill Evans, deliciously played.

There is a rare interpretive spirit in Jean-Yves Thibaudet. In a none-too-golden age for the keyboard, he stands out, a worthy bearer—more than worthy—of his country's pianistic torch.

—Jay Nordlinger

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The media

Covering governing

by James Bowman

To journalists there could have been little surprise in the announcement that former Vice President Gore was to teach a class in journalism at Columbia. Not only did he have some experience as a hack on the Nashville *Tennessean* before beginning his stellar political career, but politics and journalism are increasingly intertwined, to the point where they are becoming indistinguishable from one another. I don't mean just that we are beginning to see journalists becoming politicians (like Pat Buchanan) and politicians—or at least political handlers like George Stephanopolous or Mary Matalin—becoming journalists. This kind of thing will undoubtedly become more familiar, as we can tell from the case of Miss Matalin, whose return from television to the new Bush administration portends more going back and forth between governing and covering government.

But the distinction between journalists and politicians, at least at the top of their respective professions (if I may misuse the term in the usual way) is blurring in another way as both become sub-types—the "reality" version, if you will—of the modern media star. Perhaps the pattern for our future leaders will lie somewhere between Miss Matalin, whose charming double-act with her husband, the Democratic consultant James Carville, was beginning to look old, and Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota. The latter has gone from television wrestler to talk-show host to governor to, most recently (and while still serving as governor), chief announcer for the World Wrestling Federation's Extreme Football League (or XFL), which started broadcasting on Saturday nights on NBC just as the former vice president took up his new lectureship.

Well, a man's got to do what he knows best, I suppose, though it's not everyone who can do it with the media looking admiringly on. Football, wrestling, even political consulting have their devoted followers, but professing journalism? And then there was the title of Gore's course: "Covering National Affairs in the Information Age." One supposes that, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he knows something about *conducting* national affairs—at least it is ostensibly what he has been doing for the past twenty years—but what has that to do with *covering* them? Even in his days back on the *Tennessean* he wasn't doing that. And the bit about "the Information Age" is a transparent attempt to appear "relevant" which can only reinforce the reputation for bumptiousness of the man who once claimed that he "took the initiative in creating the Internet."

But I am being disingenuous. Just as politicians and journalists are becoming indistinguishable, so are covering national affairs and conducting them. That is the lesson of "the permanent campaign" as perfected by the Clinton presidency, which has turned governing into nine-tenths public relations—in essence the politicians "cover-

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ing" themselves—and only one-tenth what Clinton liked humorously to refer to as "the people's business." At the same time, those whose business was once supposed to be reporting have grown more and more puffed up with the sense of their own importance as a quasi-Constitutional branch of government. And, indeed, to most people the actual opposition to our Constitutionally appointed officers of state, including those of both parties in Congress, is led by Ted Koppel, Tim Russert, and Sam 'n' Cokie.

The vanishing distinction between politician and journalist was made apparent when Al Gore announced to much puzzlement but with the abject acquiescence of Columbia that his lectures were to be "off the record"—which is what politicians say to prevent journalists from attributing to them views that they in fact hold. For a journalist, or a lecturer in journalism, to claim this privilege suggests hypocrisy, or dishonesty, or self-importance, or some combination of the three. And in fact that's just what Gore displayed when he claimed, to a reporter complaining about the lack of access, "It's the school's policy." Even if that were true, it could only have been a "policy" formulated on his arrival at Columbia—since other lecturers there are not troubled with hordes of reporters clamoring to know what they have said in the classroom. If they were, I very much doubt that a "policy" of clamming up would be sustainable.

In any case, as Tunku Varadarajan reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, another off-the-record source has revealed that it was Gore himself who made the stipulation—"no gag, no Gore"—as a condition of his coming to Columbia. In his angry letter to the *Journal* about Mr. Varadarajan's article, Tom Goldstein, the dean of the Columbia J-school, complained vaguely about "bad reporting" but did not directly deny this report. Instead, he wrote, "We have asked the vice president to honor our policies and are glad he has agreed to do so"—which, to a skeptic trained in the school of Clintonian subtlety, by no means precludes the interpretation that the policies were invented by Gore before he was asked, and so graciously agreed, to honor them. The real problem, according to Dean Goldstein, is that naïfs like Mr. Varadarajan supposed that "off the record" meant that Gore's students were not supposed to talk to the press about him.

Just fancy that! The very idea! Of *course* "We had no intention of preventing students from talking to the press afterward," Dean Goldstein now peevishly insists. "If there was any misunderstanding about this, we regret it, and suggest that the term 'off the record' either needs to be better defined or to be discarded." Hear, hear. Henceforth, "off the record" shall be defined as meaning that it's okay to blab your head off about what you have heard—especially if it can advance your career. That at any rate seems to have been the thinking on the subject by the hitherto obscure Mr. Josh Noel, Columbia journalism student, and *The New York Times* which published his first-hand account of being taught by the former vice president.

Mr. Noel—who, by the way, also confirms Mr. Varadarajan's report by noting that, in response to questions from students about the "off the record" policy, David Klatell, the associate dean of academic affairs, told the class that "Mr. Gore's handlers wanted it that way"—tells of how "a group of Mr. Gore's future students gathered in a hallway one afternoon, wondering who was going to pump up a résumé by writing a story about the class." He modestly declines to mention that he himself seems to have won the pot, but he has done so without, in his view, breaching the rules as outlined by Mr Klatell:

> In the spirit of the off-the-record agreement, Mr. Gore will not be quoted here, and, if truth be told, a transcript of the class would probably make most people drowsy. There were no newsworthy tidbits about the presidential election or Mr. Gore's plans for 2004. There were no big revelations at all—other

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> than that Mr. Gore can be pretty funny. Turns out he is quick on his feet with a witty remark—sorry, you'll have to take this on faith.

Nice. He manages to flatter both Gore's vanity and the administration's paranoia—nothing to write about here, boys; go along home now—even as he is grabbing for himself the scoop that both had tried to sit on. Clearly, the kid will go far.

He also shows that he knows The Story on Gore when he writes that the former vice president "often spoke abstractly, invoking lofty and sometimes vague terminology, offering few concrete examples. This habit makes him seem well-suited for academia—perhaps better suited than for politics." His choice of words suggests that he may also have been the anonymous student who told Dawn MacKeen of *Salon.com* of the course's first lecture that "I couldn't tell you what it was about. The thing was long on theory and a lot of it was lofty. He never rolled up his sleeves and gave hard examples of what he meant."

What a story! Who would have expected lofty theory and practical vagueness of any politician, let alone Al Gore? But just as the real story, as much for Mr. Noel and Ms. MacKeen as for Mr. Varadarajan, was not so much what Gore had said in his lecture as that he had attempted to keep it quiet, so the real reason for the gag order was not that he feared being quoted, or even that he wanted to lend a false importance to his words by the pretense of secrecy, but simply as a kind of prestige marker. Gore naturally had to let it be known that he was not to be considered just another journalism professor, had to register his presence on the Columbia campus as that of a celebrity whose dealings with the press must presuppose that *it* is courting *him* instead of the other way around, as is the case with non-celebrities. The media play along because, to them, he *is* still a celebrity—though who knows how long that might continue to be the case if it weren't for the occasional media gavotte, like this one? Even with them, I wonder how long the former vice president's views on the "Information Age" will continue to fascinate.

The whole episode is a reminder of the extent to which for politicians these days the terrors of being out of office have to do not so much with losing power—President Clinton, for instance, never seemed to know what he wanted to do with his power apart from doing what was necessary to keep it—as with falling off the celebrity radar screen. When Jimmy Carter or Gerald Ford give a lecture, you can be sure that the press pack is not crowding round the door to the lecture room, panting to learn what he has said. Possibly not even banning the former presidents' auditors from disclosing what they have been told would alter this melancholy state of affairs. It will, perhaps, be considered a controversial view, but I wonder if some such reflection as this is what lay behind the behavior of former President Clinton on leaving office.

The key to Clinton's success as a politician—as to that of his successor so far—has been his ability to play to the media's expectations of him. President Bush II may in fact have learned from Clinton how to take The Story about him—in the former's case that he is a nincompoop promoted above his abilities by his family name and connections—and use it to his advantage. Thus Bush's first weeks in office were marked by a degree of fawning from the press that must have embarrassed even Bush himself—and all because (or at least to a considerable extent because) he had been expected to do badly. You might almost suppose that Bush was coaching Will Ferrell of "Saturday Night Live" and cultivating Jacob Weisberg of *Slate.com*, instructing his remarkably competent speechwriters to come up with new "Bushisms" every day to put in the latter's column of that name, so as to ensure that expectations remain as low as possible.

At the same time that Bush was triumphing in the press, however, his model was getting the worst press of his life. The behavior of the Clintons on leaving the White

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House was boorish even for them. Beginning with the former first lady's $8 million book deal, these stories continued through the last-minute arrangement with the independent counsel to cop a plea in the remaining matters connected with the Whitewater investigations, the juvenile pranks played on incoming Bush administration staff, the $190,000 of "gifts" that the former first couple took with them on leaving the White House—and, later, the $86,000 worth of that for which they had to reimburse the donors and the $28,000 worth that they were required to return as being, in fact, government property—and the more than $800,000 per annum it was going to cost in rent for former President Clinton's prime Manhattan office space.

Most damningly, there was the string of dubious last-minute pardons—including those for Roger Clinton and Susan McDougal and, above all, the one given to the fugitive financier Marc Rich, who had made his fortune trading with the enemies of the United States and then moved to Switzerland to avoid prosecution for it. Bad enough to start with, the pardon looked worse and worse with every new revelation about how much Rich's socially prominent ex-wife, Denise Rich, had given to Democratic campaign funds, or to the Clinton legal defense fund, or to the Clinton library, or to the unofficial Clinton furniture fund. The whole sorry episode was capped when Mrs. Rich pled the self-incrimination clause of the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying before a Congressional committee.

You knew that things were bad for Clinton when Maureen Dowd, who as bellwether of the press-flock had guided the rest away from advocating impeachment in 1998, began her column in *The New York Times* by writing: "Oh heck, let's just impeach him again"—even as she reminded us of how she had got him off the first time around by noting that the new revelations were "a far cry from the salacious bodice-ripper peddled by Kenneth Starr." If only Clinton had still been in office so that he could have been removed from it, it might have gone very hard with him, this time around. Censure was openly discussed in Congress. How could such a thing have happened, and so suddenly? It was almost as if the famous White House spin machine had been put into reverse. Had Clinton finally and spectacularly lost his touch with the media?

Not necessarily. Wouldn't the hypothesis requiring fewer assumptions be that there was some method to his madness? True, the fact that he didn't have to face the voters again meant that he could afford to treat public opinion as if it didn't matter, but it is also true that it matters to an ex-president in a different way than it matters to a serving one. If your first concern is not to be reelected but to remain a celebrity and media star, it is a truism that there is no such thing as bad publicity. And for an ex-president, at least one like Clinton, it might even be argued that good publicity is bad publicity—that way lie Jimmy Carter and irrelevance—and vice versa. As his presidency drew to a close, he must instinctively have seen that there was more of a future for him as a bad guy in the national wrestling ring: the guy who dresses in black and snarls at the crowd and is booed back.

Moreover, he might have begun to think of claiming a firmer place in the hearts of the left, who were always his most indefatigable defenders while in office and who now no longer needed to be kept at arm's length. Some such idea may have been in his mind when he announced, after the criticisms of his penthouse suite on the park, that he was going to move his offices to Harlem. That would fit with the theory that the models for his post-presidential media presence are to be not Ford and Carter, but Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. It didn't hurt either when complaints were received after he had been paid $100,000 to $150,000 for a speech to the investment firm of Morgan Stanley (a speech, by the way, from which the press was also excluded). Philip J. Purcell, chairman of Morgan Stanley issued a statement afterwards in which

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he was quoted as saying, "We clearly made a mistake. . . . We should have been far more sensitive to the strong feelings of our clients over Mr. Clinton's personal behavior as president." Of course, the former president won't want to give up that kind of money for giving a speech, but it's not as if the enmity of a bunch of Wall Street fat cats cannot also be useful to one who has proved so resourceful in the past in making the most of his press coverage.

I doubt that he knows yet what he will do with his post-presidency, but his first moves suggest that he has lost none of his skill at keeping himself at the center of our national attention. Gore's piffling lectureship, for all his temporarily successful attempt to stir up interest in it by banning press coverage, pales in comparison. But I wondered if he, too, wasn't getting the right idea when the news came out about a clash between the former president and vice president over who was to blame for the loss of the election. Recriminations are always entertaining in any case, but how much more so when they are the occasion for a clash of the titans: it's "The Rock" (or perhaps "The Tree") *vs.* "Mankind" of politics. If Gore rather than Bush can be set up as the regular opponent of our national bad guy, maybe even he can make a political comeback.

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Books

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s "Innocent beginnings"

by Hilton Kramer

His creed is a fixture.
—Walter Bagehot on Macaulay

It was said of Macaulay's *History of England* that its author never tired of drawing comparisons between the backwardness of earlier times and the progressiveness of his own. Whig orthodoxy—Whig complacency, too—became the measure of all political virtue, became, indeed, the measure of virtue itself. As a consequence—and not withstanding its high achievement in other respects—his *History* was said to have done much to advance the tide of moral complacency that was one of the least attractive features of the Victorian age.

Something similar might be said of the otherwise very different histories which Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has devoted to the life and times of Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Kennedy brothers. Like Macaulay's *History*, Mr. Schlesinger's histories have enjoyed a huge readership and won their author many plaudits among professional historians and in the larger world of literary and public affairs. And there is another important respect in which these histories resemble Macaulay's. They have likewise been conceived to advance a political interest—in Mr. Schlesinger's case, the interest of a liberal orthodoxy that is wholly identified with the fortunes of the Democratic Party. What Bagehot called the "party-spirit" shapes their every utterance and makes of their every narrative a fable of moral combat in which the forces of enlightenment (the Democratic Party) and the forces of benightedness (the Republican Party) struggle for ascendency. What Bagehot said of Macaulay's *History* may therefore be applied with some justice to Mr. Schlesinger's histories as well:

> When he inclines to a side, he inclines to it too much. His opinions are a shade too strong; his predilections some degrees at least too warm. . . . The Whigs are a trifle like angels; the Tories like, let us say, "our inferiors." Yet this is evidently an honest party-spirit. It does not lurk in the corners of sentences, it is not insinuated without being alleged; it does not, like the unfairness of Hume, secrete itself so subtly in the turns of words, that when you look to prove it, it is gone. On the contrary, it rushes into broad day. . . . As far as effect goes, this is an error. The very earnestness of the affection leads to a reaction . . . we cannot believe so many pages.

In the many pages which Mr. Schlesinger has now devoted to the first volume of his memoirs,[1] Republicans are indeed routinely depicted as "our inferiors"—Teddy Roosevelt is just about the only exception—while Democrats who remained loyal to Franklin Roosevelt, though not invariably treated as

1 *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917–1950*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.; Houghton-Mifflin, 557 pages, $28.95.

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angels, are nonetheless seen to be superior in intellect, wisdom, character, manners, and social vision—even at times in their sense of humor—to any other political species that attained public visibility in the author's lifetime. This, too, "leads to a reaction," for the reader of *A Life in the Twentieth Century* who is not himself an abject believer in the beneficence of the Democratic Party is unlikely to be persuaded that so many candidates for sainthood could really have been confined to a single political party in this country during the first fifty years of the last century.

In the past, Mr. Schlesinger has often shown himself to be a master of both narrative history and political polemic. Yet the first of these gifts seems to have deserted him in the writing of this voluminous memoir, which devotes over five-hundred pages to its author's first thirty-three years; and his command of polemic degenerates here to exalting his academic mentors, praising his political comrades, and settling old scores with his ideological adversaries. At times this relentless liberal preening verges on the intolerable, and it is not only in regard to politics, moreover, that the author's impulse to complacency and his sense of moral superiority reign supreme.

For *A Life in the Twentieth Century* is also, from start to finish, the autobiography of a Harvard man, and Mr. Schlesinger never tires of reminding us of the central role which Harvard—and the access it affords to privilege and preferment—has played in his personal and professional life. As a consequence, there are more than a few moments in this memoir when those hapless souls who made the mistake of not gaining access to those privileges are similarly treated as "our inferiors." There is thus an element of insouciant period snobbery in this book of which its author seems, if not unaware, then curiously indifferent. Opinion will differ—differ, I suppose, along the usual party lines—as to how this display of unembarrassed snobbery comports with the author's doctrinaire advocacy of liberal virtue. For this reader, certainly, Mr. Schlesinger's unabashed Harvard chauvinism lends a distinct element of social comedy to *A Life in the Twentieth Century* that its author is unlikely to have intended.

Mr. Schlesinger came by both his politics and his intellectual vocation—and, for that matter, his Harvard connection—as a family legacy. Although born in Ohio, in 1917, where his father was teaching American history and political science at the State University, the younger Arthur Schlesinger grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Arthur Schlesinger *père* had joined the Harvard history faculty in 1923. And just as his father had long been a vocal supporter of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, the future author of *The Age of Roosevelt* boasts of having been an "ardent New Dealer" since his undergraduate years at Harvard.

"It is, I suppose, evidence of lack of imagination or of some other infirmity of character," he writes at the close of this long book,

> but I am somewhat embarrassed to confess that I have not radically altered my general outlook in more than half a century since *The Vital Center*'s publication [in 1949]. Perhaps I should apologize for not being able to claim disillusions, revelations, conversions. But in fact I have not been born again, and there it is.

This is all undoubtedly true as far as Mr. Schlesinger's devotion to the New Deal and the Democratic Party is concerned. "I remain to this day a New Dealer, unreconstructed and unrepentant," he writes in *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, and there is no reason to doubt it. Yet in one important respect, Mr. Schlesinger has indeed undergone a conversion of sorts. This is on the subject of anti-Communism. For the writer who sounded the alarm about Communism in *Life* magazine in 1946 and in *The Vital Center* in 1949, warning liberals in no uncertain terms against the consequences of succumbing to the totalitarian temptations

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of the radical Left, has in recent years lent his considerable prestige to the anti-anti-Communist campaign that grew out of the political uproars of the 1960s. In *The Vital Center,* Mr. Schlesinger could say of the widespread support of Communism in American liberal circles at the dawn of the Cold War that "This was in a real sense a *trahison des clercs*," and as late as 1960, in *The Politics of Upheaval*—volume one of *The Age of Roosevelt*—the chapter on Communist influence was called "Growth of a Conspiracy." At the end of that chapter Mr. Schlesinger wrote of the Roosevelt administration's refusal to take the Communist conspiracy seriously that "The American government knew no more spectacular failure than this in the decade of the thirties."

Even then, to be sure, he softened his criticism of this failure by also characterizing the Communist conspiracy in this country as "an underground creature, pallid but vicious, negligible and even comic in many of its aspects, yet still a great potential challenge to American democracy." Yet, in *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Mr. Schlesinger's categorical judgment on the Communist conspiracy is repeatedly summed up in the phrase: "no harm done." Which, as an account of the Communist issue in this country, is fairly breathtaking even from an unrepentant New Dealer. Needless to say, there are now no references to a *trahison des clercs* or to the Roosevelt administration's "spectacular failure" in dealing with the Communist "underground" or to "a great potential challenge to American democracy." After 1968, such utterances ran the risk of sounding like Richard Nixon and, after 1980, even more like Ronald Reagan. The altered political and cultural climate required a change of course for a Democratic Party loyalist even before the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union. To be seen to be a doctrinaire anti-Communist was no longer permissible for the liberal elite, and Mr. Schlesinger adjusted his position accordingly.

As an earnest of that adjustment, Mr. Schlesinger took to stigmatizing Sidney Hook, his former ally in the liberal anti-Communist crusade of *The Vital Center* period, as the wrong kind of anti-Communist. Hook was then an easy target, of course. He had already run into trouble on this score among his old comrades on *Partisan Review*, which had itself accommodated itself to the politics and culture of 1960s radicalism. He had been effectively banished from the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Times Magazine*, where he had been considered something of a star in *The Vital Center* period. It was Hook, for example, who wrote a long laudatory review of Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* for the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* in 1950. So, for that matter, did Mr. Schlesinger, in *The Saturday Review*. But in the new, post-Sixties climate, Hook couldn't even get his books reviewed in the *Times*. His anti-Communism had rendered him unpublishable in the liberal press.

It was left for Mr. Schlesinger to put the knife in when Hook published his own memoir, *Out Of Step*, in 1987. Reviewing this book, in *The New Republic*, he grandly announced that "there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the anti-Communist philosophy," and happily set about the task of eviscerating what remained of Hook's reputation as a liberal anti-Communist. It was an ugly, self-serving assault on the integrity of a man who had honorably served his country and its culture in difficult times, and for some of us it will always remain a stain on whatever honor Mr. Schlesinger may claim for himself.

Even more dismaying is the eagerness with which Mr. Schlesinger now returns to the attack in the closing pages of *A Life in the Twentieth Century*. Once again, it is alleged that Sidney Hook's "great error" was "in letting anticommunism take over his life." Hook, it is again charged, "considerably exaggerates the power of American Communists." Hook's observation that

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Communist influence in the Thirties was "so strong it amounted to domination of key areas of American cultural life, in literature, art, and movies," is categorically rejected without ever being addressed. So are Hook's criticisms of certain literary figures—Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy among them. Hook's perfectly accurate statement that Mailer "would forgive murder" is dismissed as the work of "a bitter man," which, among much else, suggests that Mr. Schlesinger does not have a very close acquaintance with "The White Negro" and certain of Mailer's other writings having to do with the "existential" glory to be found in committing murder. Nor does Mr. Schlesinger condescend to acknowledge Mary McCarthy's enthusiastic praise of the Communist regime in North Vietnam, for she, too, had escaped the onus of being tagged a liberal anti-Communist in the post-Sixties era.

The fact is, Hook was not exaggerating the Communist influence on key areas of American cultural life in the Thirties. If anything, he may have underestimated the scale and lasting effects of that influence. It was, after all, the Cominterm's Popular Front, proclaimed as official Communist policy in 1935, that determined not only the political content of "progressive" culture in this country from the mid-1930s right through the war and postwar years of the 1940s, but also its cultural level as well. As Robert Warshow wrote in his essay on "The Legacy of the 30s" in 1947, when Mr. Schlesinger was himself a good deal more reliable on these matters than he is now, "What happened was more than the defection of one part of the intelligentsia. The whole level of thought and discussion, the level of culture itself, had been lowered." Writers who resisted the blight of the Popular Front mentality—William Faulkner, for example, and Wallace Stevens—were precisely the writers most abominated by the Communists and their liberal fellow travelers. Even such distinguished critics as Malcolm Cowley and Alfred Kazin could not bring themselves to acknowledge Faulkner's greatness until after the Second World War when it became politically safer to do so. If you doubt this, go back and see how Faulkner fared in the pages of *The New Republic* during Cowley's literary editorship there in the 1930s or have a look at Kazin's treatment of Faulkner in *On Native Grounds* (1942). That they afterwards lavished all sorts of praise on Faulkner is beside the point. When the Communists and their fellow travelers were still a power on the literary scene, such critics could be counted upon to fall into line. All of this is something that Hook understood, and Mr. Schlesinger still does not.

What really seems to animate Mr. Schlesinger's continued assault on Hook's now posthumous reputation isn't any argument about the fortunes of American cultural life, however. Despite his sometimes lengthy lists of the movies and plays he has seen and loved and the famous cultural figures he has known, Mr. Schlesinger writes as a cultural innocent on such subjects. His opinions are invariably those of a middlebrow liberal with a philistine taste, and are not so different, by the way, from Hook's own views on the arts.[2] What he finds unforgivable about Hook is something else—his politics. "While still describing himself as a socialist in *Out of Step*," he writes, "Hook was at the same time an unabashed supporter of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan." This is what has driven this unreconstructed New Dealer to perform a final hatchet job on his former comrade-in-arms.

About his disagreements with his "friends" on the radical Left, Mr. Schlesinger tends to write in a more fraternal and forgiving spirit. Thus he writes with a special fondness about his friendship with the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm and certain other "Leninists"—his word—at Cambridge University:

2 For a discussion of Sidney Hook's views on the arts, see my essay "The Role of Sidney Hook" in *The Twilight of the Intellectuals* (1999).

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> British Communists, at least in the universities, were very different from the Communists I had known in the United States. Firm in their faith and articulate in its support, they—or at any rate those at Cambridge who had not been recruited by Soviet intelligence—did not pretend to be liberals or social democrats. They were Leninists, and proud of it. They did not go in for the dissembling and deceit routinely practiced by American Communists.

And further:

> Incompatibility in ideology did not prevent compatibility in personal relations, at least with Hobsbawm, [Pieter] Keuneman, H. S. Ferns, a Canadian historian at Trinity College, John Alexander, a witty young man from a proper county family, and others. I considered them good friends, and I wholeheartedly endorsed Eric's inscription when he gave me his *Age of Extremes* in 1994: "For Arthur, in memory of 55 years of friendship and disagreement."

Reading *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, you sometimes have to wonder if Mr. Schlesinger really understands the meaning of *la trahison des clercs*.

The life & the "Life"

Peter Martin
A Life of James Boswell.
Yale University Press, 613 pages $35

Adam Sisman
Boswell's Presumptuous Task.
Hamish Hamilton, 392 pages, £17.99.

reviewed by John Derbyshire

Published in 1791, the *Life of Samuel Johnson* became famous at once, but left everyone baffled that such a tremendous masterpiece could have been produced by James Boswell. The biographer was regarded by those who knew him as a talentless buffoon and by many others as something even less. Macaulay, most famously, pronounced Boswell "one of the smallest men who ever lived . . . a man of the meanest and feeblest intellect . . . servile and impertinent, shallow and pedantic, a bigot and a sot . . . a common butt in the taverns of London." Does not a work of genius require a genius for its production?

The mystery endured for half-a-century, until a cache of Boswell's letters was discovered and published in the 1850s. This began the long, gradual discovery of Boswell himself, as more and more of his journals and letters came to light. We now know that the great biography of Johnson had its foundations in a much larger work of art: Boswell's obsessive chronicling of his own life. He observed early on that he would not like to live any more of life than he could record, and he seems to have remained true to this ideal, at least until his very last years.

Given that we know so intimately much about Boswell from his own hand, it seems to me a very daunting thing to attempt a biography of him. In *A Life of James Boswell*, Peter Martin has taken the direct approach, proceeding steadily from the subject's birth (in Edinburgh, 1740) to his death (London, 1795). Adam Sisman's *Boswell's Presumptuous Task*[1] follows a different plan, giving us a decent summary of Boswell's earlier years but concentrating on the creation of the *Life of Johnson* and taking its title from that book's opening sentence: "To write the life of him who excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others . . . may be reckoned in me a presumptuous task." The difference in the two authors' approaches to their common subject can be seen by noting the point in each book at which Boswell sits down to write the *Life*. This point, which occurred 83 percent of the way through Boswell's own actual life, is reached 90 percent of the way through the narrative part of Martin's book, but just before the halfway mark in Sisman's.

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1 Sisman's volume will be published in the U.S. in August by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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We find Boswell here much as we already knew him: bumptious, foolish, morbid, priapic, endlessly observing himself. "I have an excess of self-esteem," he noted at age twenty-five, and he was not mistaken. To Jean-Jacques Rousseau, no less, he said at parting: "You have shown me great goodness. But I deserved it." Such a high regard for himself might have made him insufferable—but no, almost everyone seemed to like him (Mrs. Thrale and Horace Walpole were significant exceptions). As Mary Hamilton noted in her own diary: "Mr. Boswell is one of those people with whom one instantly feels acquainted." Johnson took to him at once and wavered in his affection only when Boswell pressed him too hard for his opinions about the afterlife, a topic of endless fascination for Boswell but terrifying to the great lexicographer.

Martin is especially good on Boswell's youthful travels in Europe, and on his relationship with his cold, unimaginative father (who declared journal-keeping to be "a register of follies" and Johnson "a brute"). Sisman is at his best showing us what pains Boswell took to get his facts right in the *Life*. "He was determined to paint a 'Flemish picture' of his friend, faithful to life, and accurate in every detail." It is, in fact, extraordinary to see this man, who in his everyday affairs was often so careless, dilatory, and chaotic, authenticating his material with such diligence. Boswell himself had, of course, been the first to notice this aspect of his abilities: "How attentive and accurate I am!," he had told his journal in 1778. This assiduity would not be so striking in a biographer of our own time, but was unusual in those days. Certainly it was not Johnson's method. When Johnson was writing his *Lives of the Poets*, Boswell went to some trouble to arrange for him an interview with Lord Marchmont, Pope's friend and executor. Johnson could not be bothered to go. "If it *rained* knowledge I'd hold out my hand," he said irritably, "but I would not give myself the trouble to go in quest of it." Later, notes Martin, the two men did call on Marchmont and were treated to a feast of Popean anecdotes. Boswell took careful notes, but Johnson never used them.

Boswell's labor on the *Life* was undertaken, as Johnson had said of his own work on the *Dictionary*, "not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academick bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow." Boswell's beloved wife died shortly after he had completed his first draft of the *Life*, plunging him into grief. There was also continuous financial strain. Boswell was chronically short of cash and was for ever seeking after "preferment"—some salaried sinecure or a seat in parliament. In vain, for the most part: that youthful excess of self-esteem notwithstanding, Boswell felt towards the end of his life that he had been a failure. Sisman:

> As a young man, Boswell had set out the achievements for which he hoped to be remembered by his grandchildren: "He improved and beautified his paternal estate of Auchinleck; made a distinguished figure in Parliament; had the honour to command a regiment of footguards, and was one of the brightest wits in the court of George the Third." Now, thirty years later, it seemed unlikely that any of these hopes would be realized.

He did his best with his responsibilities as a landowner, but perhaps there never was a man less suited to estate management. To someone with as much need for stimulation as Boswell, the slow tempo and unpolished society of the countryside were irksome. "How hard it is that I do not enjoy this fine place," he wrote to his brother from Auchinleck. All his striving for "preferment" only landed him at last in the service of Lord Lonsdale, the worst bore and greatest miser in England. Boswell got a minor position out of Lonsdale but soon gave it up as not worth the trouble.

As for being "one of the brightest wits in the court of George the Third": well, *that* would not have been very difficult of at-

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tainment, but Boswell seems not to have tried very hard to seek royal favor, though he was presented several times. Sisman has a hilarious account of one of these occasions, when Boswell attempted to get the King's ruling on a delicate point of literary protocol: what was the proper way to refer to Charles Stuart, who, thirty years earlier, had tried to take the throne from George's grandfather? "[T]he King attempted to end the conversation and turned away, but Boswell took his sovereign by the elbow and brought him back round."

In his last years, with the second edition of the *Life* published, his hopes of preferment dwindling, his wife dead, and no task to occupy himself with, Boswell sank into alcoholism and despair. He began to neglect his journal and in April of 1794 abandoned it altogether—a very bad sign. He tried to rally himself, writing to his son in October that: "I cannot be contented merely with literary fame and social enjoyments. I must still hope for some creditable employment, and perhaps I may yet attain it." Six months later he was dead.

Both these books are very worthy, each in its own way. Neither is infected with any lit-crit faddishness or with the kind of psychological speculations that, for me, slightly marred Jackson Bate's 1977 biography of Johnson. I did jump slightly at the point where, in his introduction, Sisman declares his intention to "deconstruct" the *Life*, but it was a false alarm: the spirit of Derrida is entirely absent here. These are matter-of-fact accounts of a man's life, thought, and work, Sisman concentrating more especially on the work.

Both books came to me in finished form, not as reviewer's galleys, and I cannot leave them without some remarks on editing. *Boswell's Presumptuous Task* is well-produced. The only mistake I spotted was George the Third saying: "I glory in the name of Britain" (should be "Briton"). Peter Martin's book, on the other hand, must be traversed through a steady drizzle of errors and typos, some of them very disorienting in a biography. When you are trying to keep track of precisely where you are in a person's life, it does not help to have "1766" printed for "1776," or "October" for "May." (Why do not all biographers follow Boswell in printing the year, and the subject's age, at the top of every page?) Boswell's son James was born in 1778, not 1779. Johnson was fifty-three at their first meeting, not fifty-four. We are given Johnson's opinion about vows in chapter 13, and then all over again in chapter 22 . . . and so on. Our big university presses used to be models of accuracy in editing. No longer, apparently. They—I suppose I mean their compositorial software—no longer even know how to kern away the closing quote after an italicized exclamation point. And why did *neither* author vouchsafe to us the piece of information—surely essential to a thoughtful reader—that Auchinleck is pronounced "affleck"?

Putting on the make-up

Gary A. Stringer, editor
The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 2: The Elegies.
Indiana University Press,
1046 pages, $69.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

After the detail of these thousand pages, with their exhaustive bibliographical analyses, lists of textual variants, and summaries of critical opinion, we are left pretty much where we were in the first place in regard to Donne's *Elegies*. Allying themselves with the view, expressed over recent years by such scholars as Arthur Marotti and Harold Love, that "scribal publication" functioned alongside the printed book as an important and legitimate means of textual transmission in the seventeenth century, the editors persuade us that the Westmoreland manuscript, in the hand of Donne's long-standing acquaintance Rowland Woodward, is the best copy-text and that its ordering of

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the seventeen poems is probably authorial. They are rightly cautious about dating any of the poems more firmly than to somewhere in the 1590s, a few possibly later. Unfortunately, being compilers rather than initiators of critical discussion, they have no independent answers to the most perplexing questions: how confident can we be about the *tone* of any of these poems, and the degree of seriousness to be accorded them?

What are we to say, for example, when confronted with the opening lines of "The Comparison"?[1]

> As the sweet sweat of roses in a still,
> As that which from chafed musk cat's pores doth trill,
> As the almighty balm of th'early east,
> Such are the sweat drops on my mistress' breast.
> And on her neck her skin such lustre sets,
> They seem no sweat drops, but pearl carcanets.
> Rank sweaty froth thy mistress' brow defiles,
> Like spermatic issue of ripe menstruous boils.

"My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun" looks milksop stuff beside this: it carries anti-Petrarchanism to Swiftian extremes. Our first instinct is to be simply disgusted, but, consulting the commentary, we find various critics asserting that Donne is merely employing rhetorical tropes, that he is parodying imitations of Petrarch, that he is criticizing the evasiveness of conventional praise of physical beauty, that his attractive mistress and his rival's ugly one are in fact the same woman seen from different aesthetic perspectives, that the poem is culpably misogynist, and that, on the contrary, it is proto-feminist in its exposure of the reductiveness of idealized female beauty. Disgust, it seems, is too naïve; once we understand the literary tradition and cultural milieu to which the poem belongs, proper appreciation will follow. But where, amid this babble of voices, shall wisdom be found?

"Elegy" in the Renaissance could include pastoral, funerary, and didactic poetry as well as the paradoxical and often scabrous love-poem, descending principally from Ovid, to which Donne's elegies seem to belong. The 1590s were a boom time for Ovidian poetry in English, witnessing, among other items, Marlowe's translations of the *Amores* (banned in 1599, when many copies were publicly burnt), his *Hero and Leander*, and Shakespeare's narrative poems and sonnets—for which he was compared to Ovid by Francis Meres in 1598. The earlier, humanist emphasis on the morally edifying qualities of classical literature had given way, by this stage, to a racier and more lascivious curiosity. Donne, as a young man about town and, like his scribe Woodward, a member of Lincoln's Inn, might feel this was a profitable strain to exploit—the fashionable tone at the Inns seems to have been the classic undergraduate one of witty and smutty flippancy. The speaker of Donne's elegies often reminds us of Iago, reducing love to "a lust of the blood and a permission of the will"; it has often been suggested (albeit unprovably) that the Shakespeare play which most resembles these poems, *Troilus and Cressida*, was performed at one of the Inns.

Intriguingly, in Elegy 11, "On his Mistress," Donne may allude to some of Shakespeare's plays. The situation, in which the girl proposes to flee her parents' wrath disguised as a page-boy accompanying her lover, recalls Julia's stratagem to follow Proteus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, while the closing mention of a nurse who is startled out of bed at midnight by the girl's fears for her lover's safety evokes *Romeo and Juliet*. The biographical criticism of a bygone age debated whether the addressee of this poem, as of many others, was Donne's future wife Ann More, and, if so, applauded her bold cross-dressing proposal ("Here was a wife fit for a poet!"—George Gilfillan, 1860), but we assume, perhaps wrongly, that the literary borrowings make a basis in

1 The edition under review prints the poems in the spelling of the manuscript. For convenience, I have modernized the spelling in quotations.

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fact much less likely. The speaker is not enthusiastic about his lady's suggestion:

> Be my true mistress still, not my feigned
> page. . . .
> Dissemble nothing, not a boy, nor change
> Thy body's habit, nor mind's; be not
> strange
> To thy self only; all will spy in thy face
> A blushing womanly discovering grace.

Here is another central paradox of these poems: the speaker urges constancy and assumes an essential selfhood of the kind which seems unattainable, both in the ceaselessly metamorphic universe of Ovid, and in the vertiginously relativistic world of postmodernism. Yet the voice of the *Elegies*, as we pass from poem to poem, is itself radically unstable. Indeed, in "Change" and "Variety" the transitoriness of the natural world is cited as a justification for infidelity in love: "Change is the nursery/ Of music, joy, life, and eternity." This exalted sentiment reminds us of Spenser's *Mutability Cantos*, yet it is the culmination of a poem which takes for granted, again like Iago, that women are no better than foxes or goats in their promiscuity. In the face of such incongruities, do we conclude that Donne is being insincere, that his sincerity is more inclusive than ours, or, as Lionel Trilling long-ago urged, that authenticity of poetic utterance is a more reliable concept than sincerity? We are all too familiar with the suggestion that "the self" is a mere externally constructed device in the early modern period, that Donne is a quick-change artist who dons a succession of masks and emits ventriloquial impersonations but who himself remains faceless and voiceless. This is sometimes dignified as "dramatic," and one would normally want to say that it cheapens our conception of drama, but there is more warrant for it in these poems than in many. One does feel that Donne is trying out attitudes and stances, often unpleasant ones. He mocks the "silly [i.e., naïve] old morality" which would make his lover's bracelet an emblem of emotional security ("The Bracelet"); he tries to argue himself into bed by maintaining that the most loyal military "service" is the begetting of future soldiers ("Love's War"); he advises a friend to marry the hideous Flavia, who "hath yet an Anagram of a good face," because at least there will be no chance of her cuckolding him ("The Anagram").

One of the best-known examples of elusive tone occurs in Elegy 8, "To his Mistress going to bed," which William Empson, in a series of essays, made a litmus-paper test of Donne's honorable intentions. In this poem, having compared the woman to America, his "newfound land," virgin territory ripe for exploration, the speaker urges her to

> Cast all, yea this white linen hence,
> Here is no penance, much less innocence.
> To teach thee, I am naked first: why then
> What needst thou have more covering than
> a man?

Empson rejected the reading of the second line here quoted, which is found in about one-third of the sixty-seven seventeenth-century manuscripts of the poem and in Helen Gardner's edition (1965), preferring the reading of the majority of manuscripts, of the first printed appearance of the poem in the 1669 edition, and of Grierson's edition of 1912: "There is no penance due to innocence." Empson wanted this to be what Donne wrote because he was convinced that Donne was a heretic who, in this poem, was imaging himself and the girl as prelapsarian innocents beyond the sanctions of religion, and was protesting that sex was naturally pure and good. The other reading, he felt, makes Donne into a cynical libertine.[2]

2 Empson states his case in the essay "Donne in the new edition" reprinted in the first volume of his *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, but there is also an important unreprinted piece, "'There is no penance due to innocence'" in *The New York Review of Books* of December 3, 1981.

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Empson's argument remains unproven; he gives far too much weight to this poem alone, ignoring the extent to which the reading he condemns aligns it with others in the group. Moreover, since he believes that Donne himself altered the line, he concedes, in effect, that both attitudes are attributable to the author—or should we say the speaker? Empson reads the poem as straight autobiography, but, as mentioned earlier, this is not an unproblematic assumption.

I must confess that I have a test-case of my own: Elegy 13, "The Autumnal." This seems to me the only really great poem among the group. It is basically in praise of an older woman, honoring the beauty of mellow age with wonderful grave tenderness. Donne risks the accusation of bad taste here and there, but the wit is so controlled that it turns the marks of age into trophies:

> Call not these wrinkles, graves; if graves they were
> They were Love's graves; for else he is nowhere.
> Yet lies not Love dead here, but here doth sit
> Vowed to this trench, like an anachorit,
> And here, till her, which must be his death, come,
> He doth not dig a grave, but build a tomb.

As in Keats's ode, autumn is here the perfect moment of fruition just before the ravages of winter. John Carey, in his book *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (1981), cites in this context a sermon in which Donne said that "in Heaven it is always Autumn." Thus, when the speaker turns from the specter of physical decay at the end of the poem, he declares his loyalty to a more graceful decline, but also perhaps to an intimation of immortality:

> I hate extremes; yet I had rather stay
> With tombs, than cradles, to wear out a day.
> Since such love's natural lation is, may still
> My love descend, and journey down the hill,
> Not panting after growing beauties, so,
> I shall ebb out with them, who homeward go.

("Lation" is an astronomical term denoting the movement of a body from one place to another.) The punctuation of these lines, their slippery enjambments and expressive caesuras, carry us gently "down the hill" as they ebb out towards their own home. One's instinct is, like Empson's, to see a real-life situation here, and to acclaim the poem's sincerity. There appears to be warrant for this. Izaak Walton, Donne's first biographer, says that the poem was addressed to Mrs. Magdalen Herbert, mother of George Herbert, whom Donne met when he was approaching forty, i.e., about 1612; she was four or five years his senior. Walton's dating has however been contested, and the poem is now frequently assigned to c. 1600, when Donne would have been about twenty-eight and Mrs. Herbert thirty-two, making a factual basis less likely. Moreover, some critics assure us that the poem is satirical, mocking the faded beauty it ostensibly celebrates.

In the end, the *Elegies* are experiments in rhetoric, and whilst, for Donne as for Shakespeare, that does not automatically entail insincerity, it refuses to make sincerity the touchstone of excellence. We are seldom reminded as forcefully as by these poems that in the Latin poetry which underlies them the idea of rhetorical figuration is itself imaged as the application of cosmetics.

When in Romania

Mihail Sebastian Journal: 1935–1944,
translated by Radu Ioanid.
Ivan R. Dee, 641 pages, $36

reviewed by Anne Applebaum

Right up until the middle of the 1930s, Mihail Sebastian, a young Bucharest writer, lived a life that would have been recognizable to any other young writer in the Manhattan or London of the same era. His

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days were passed in thinking, writing, daydreaming, socializing. He worried that his books were not selling enough and wondered whether to make his plays more accessible to a wider public. He thought about whether he had chosen the right sort of publisher and avidly read the comments of his reviewers. He conducted complicated love affairs. He learned to ski. He went to dinner parties given by other writers and counted among his friends actresses, university professors, and the odd rich businessman with literary pretensions.

Like his friends, Sebastian argued about aesthetics and politics. Like his friends, he went to literary cocktail parties. Like his friends, he wrote criticism for small magazines. But Sebastian was not like his friends; he was Jewish. And in the middle of the 1930s, his Bucharest slowly ceased to resemble Manhattan or London. In the latter half of that decade, latent Romanian anti-Semitism began to grow more powerful, both on the streets and in the intellectual circles that Sebastian frequented. Writing in his diary, which he began to keep right about at this time, he described the effects of this change in both spheres. The result is a genuinely original literary achievement, whose first Romanian publication in 1996 sparked off a tormented national debate about anti-Semitism, the Romanian intellectual tradition, and Romania's role in the war.

At first, it isn't easy to see why this book caused such a fuss. Its early pages obsessively recount a love affair. Because it was never meant for publication, Sebastian sometimes recounts stories which are impossible to understand out of context, or tantalizingly fails to explain something: "I regret not recording it here but I don't feel up to writing a longer note." Round about 1936, however, the diary's tone begins to change. On June 24 of that year he notes that

> Yesterday evening there was a street-fighting atmosphere on Strada Gabroveni. . . . The Jewish shopkeeers had lowered their shutters and were waiting for their attackers, determined to resist them. I think that's the only thing to do. If we're going to kick the bucket, we might as well do it with a club in our hands. It's no less tragic, but at least not so ridiculous.

Then, on June 25, he meets a friend, Camil Petrescu, at a Bucharest restaurant. The Jews have brought anti-Semitism upon themselves, Petrescu tells him: "there are too many of them." Sebastian marvels at the conversation:

> That is Camil Petrescu speaking. Camil Petrescu is one of the finest minds in Romania. Camil Petrescu is one of the most sensitive creatures in Romania.

By the end of 1937, a full-fledged anti-Semitic government was installed in Romania, and these experiences were to repeat themselves many times. With every passing day, Sebastian witnessed increasing public bullying of the Jews, some truly frightening, some petty: "Starting from tomorrow, Jews will pay twenty lei for a loaf of bread instead of the fifteen lei for Christians," he notes morosely in August 1942. A few days later, Jewish bicycles were confiscated; Jewish skis had been taken already. Although he himself was never interned, in the course of the war Sebastian lost his job, his apartment, and the possibility of publishing the novels which, as he was desperately trying to earn money by teaching or translating, he no longer had time to write.

Yet Sebastian went on half-participating in the social milieu he had always been part of, despite the fact that the changes in his private world were no less profound. Still doing the rounds of fashionable restaurants and parties, he looked on as the conversation and manners of his friends grew increasingly brutal. Many joined the fascist Iron Guard and started spouting anti-Semitic propaganda. Others didn't join openly, but didn't protest or complain either. All grew awkward in their conversations with

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him. But it took some time before the awkwardness grew into an open break, and it is this which makes Sebastian's journal unique: he became, in effect, the witness to the corruption of an entire intellectual generation. By day, he kept in touch with his friends, went to parties with them, went to lunch with them. By night, he described their moral cowardice in his diary.

He records, for example, a conversation he has had with a friend who starts denouncing a mutual acquaintance. Why the vehemence, he wonders at first. Then he realizes:

> He imagines that I could land, as Poldy has landed, in some kind of serious trouble—and he is warning me not to rely on him. "How shameless to turn to a friend, just because he is less exposed than you are." Maybe he wants to warn me against one day being so "shameless."

Later, a publishing acquaintance gives him a few children's books to translate. "It's to do you a favor," the man says grandly—and, taking advantage of Sebastian's poverty, offers to pay him a pittance. Then, a few days after the German surrender at Stalingrad, Sebastian encounters one of the more open fascists at a party:

> It amused me to hear him talk about the war. I realized that, seen from the other side, things can even today have a different aspect. It is not the facts that count but the eyes that behold them. . . . In his opinion, nothing new has happened. The Russians will be annhilated in April ("the Führer said this to Antonescu") or in July, or at worst in the autumn. The Germans are stronger than ever; their reserves untouched. . . . Stalingrad will be recaptured very soon, perhaps in the next few days.

He manages, almost, to make the encounter sound funny. But much as one would like to describe Sebastian laughing at the shabbiness of his milieu, seeing the lighter side of life, this isn't really an amusing book. His writer's ear is able to pick out telling phrases that make those uttering them sound like fools. His detached, intellectual wit enables him to express a morbid sort of irony when, at a dinner party, a visiting Frenchman is prevented from making anti-Semitic remarks by the host, who admonishes, "*Notre ami est juif*," stopping the man in his tracks. "For my part," writes Sebastian, "I'd have preferred it if the guy had been allowed to speak."

At a deeper level, however, it is clear that he is profoundly disillusioned with the shallowness of his society. At times he tries to describe this sensation, but when he does so, his customary wit and cleverness deserts him. "I am vegetating, dragging myself from one day to the next, becoming old and worn out, losing myself," he writes. Or "Everything passes slowly and with exasperating difficulty, endless and seemingly hopeless." Even after the war's end, he feels no pleasure when those who have tormented him beg forgiveness. Rather than feeling hatred, he has a terrible rush of nostalgia and sadness when he learns of the death of the wife of his former best friend, a man who had become a committed fascist and broken off all communication. He was indeed one of the few men of his intellectual generation to see through the evil which temporarily gripped his country, and in the end he is vindicated. Those who have fired him from jobs beg to have him back, those starting new newspapers and periodicals knock constantly at his door. But this gives him no pleasure. Nothing brings back his former belief in the fundamental goodness of those around him.

In the end, Sebastian feels, simply, terribly alone. In the final entry of the diary, written in 1944, after the Russians had occupied Bucharest and the war was effectively over, he tries to describe this feeling:

> I can't say or write anything; words do not help me. A few times I stood still and watched the view, with the idea of fixing the contours in my mind. . . . I must be getting very old. I didn't find my old exuberance in the mountains. I was melancholic, rather, almost des-

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> pondent. I feel an old weariness, and everywhere I go I carry an incurable loneliness with me.

A few months later, Sebastian died in a car accident in Bucharest. He left behind him a handful of books and plays—and this diary, a small reminder of how thin is the veneer of Western civilization, how close to the surface are brutality and hatred.

Shorter notices

R. L. Barth, editor
The Selected Letters of Yvor Winters.
Swallow Press/Ohio University Press,
423 pages, $49.95.

No one aware of Yvor Winters's reputation for brawling literary criticism will be taken aback by his letters' ability to inflict a blow. Readers unfamiliar with his deadpan, gravel-voiced style, however, may be surprised to discover its wry and often generous good humor. Regularly salting his letters with levity as well as curt judgments, Winters maintained robust exchanges with Allen Tate, Lincoln Kirstein, Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Harriet Monroe, R. P. Blackmur, Malcolm Cowley, Louise Bogan, and Theodore Roethke, among others. Winters, who taught at Stanford for most of his career, might have sequestered himself in "Castle Adamant on the Pacific" (in Richard Howard's phrase), but, as his letters attest, in his influence and associations he remained very near the center of American poetry.

With Monroe, the founder of *Poetry*, he developed a precocious candor. Not yet twenty, Winters wrote that he feared her magazine was "sliding rather too rapidly, and [would] soon be, as the saying goes, among the dogs." Winters accused her of printing "things that are absolutely dull and without excuse and abominably done." Despite Winters's rebarbative tone, Monroe continued to correspond with him and kept his poems and essays appearing in her pages. "I have known the old woman for fourteen years," he later wrote to Linclon Kirstein, who made Winters western editor of his landmark journal, *Hound & Horn*, "and fought with her steadily and until fairly recently amicably." The extent to which Monroe responded in kind remains uncertain; Winters routinely destroyed the letters he received, and he even encouraged others such as Tate to do the same with those he wrote to them. This ample collection provides the measure of their noncompliance.

The greatest epistolary exchange of Winters's career—the one with Crane—constitutes the greatest irony as well: Winters sedulously preserved Crane's letters, while his, presumably in Crane's possession, were lost or destroyed. As a result there is no vestige of the correspondance in this collection. But that theirs was one of the essential dialogues in modern poetry is clear from Crane's letters, which appear in *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*, by Thomas Parkinson (1978). Parkinson follows their initial friendship and eventual falling-out, while attempting to mortar up the hole left by Winters's lost letters. Relying on contemporaneous correspondence from Winters to Allen Tate, a common friend, Parkinson fills in what gaps he can, and the result is well worth reading.

Winters's dispatches are striking in their lack of pleasantries. He loved to talk shop, and a typical letter jumps right in. To Tate, he begins: "Eliot, my dear man, is something left over from your youth, a habit of feeling that you have never understood clearly enough to eradicate, like a nostalgia for Santa Claus." Similar aperçus on poets and poetry abound: echoing Shakespeare, he pronounces that late Joyce, "despite the expense of genius, is a waist of verbiage." To Kirstein in 1933: "Auden and his friends strike me as pretty muddled." On Yeats: "I feel as Chesterton felt about Blake, that if he is really bent on keeping company in the other world, he ought to be more particular about the company." He wrote that Stevens, whom he greatly admired, "really could

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handle only one theme: that of the isolated nominalist, in an impersonal universe, confronted by death." Winters's bluntness, which he could play for comic effect, completely nonplussed Marianne Moore, who regularly wound her letters in skeins of aggressive decorum. No sooner had Moore and Winters begun their verbal dance than they realized the mismatch and hobbled off to look for other partners. (Moore later wrote a poem for Winters in which she called him "something of a badger-Diogenes.")

Of the extant correspondence, Winters's letters to Tate hold the most consistent literary interest. Tate seems to have held his own, even with someone as ornery as Winters occasionally proved. Winters clearly admired Tate, calling him the best critic of his generation and lauding his poems, though candor not praise remained his primary M.O. When the first reports of Crane's death reached him, Winters wrote to Tate that "if it was suicide, he at least had the courage of his convictions, whatever cloudy notions they were based on, & definitely called the bluff of a hundred-odd years of hypocritical pantheistic mysticism." What ever happened to *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*? Yet, behind Winters's brisk appraisal there exists an overtone of loss and genuine sorrow. Winters had considered Crane a friend and a great poet. He felt that if it weren't for his boundless romanticism he could have been even greater, that it had been ruinous for him personally as well as artistically. He may have been right.

In the end, Winters's letters present him less as a firebrand critic than as a poet writing to other poets. His discoveries—in criticism, in life—were often inextricably linked to discoveries in verse, and this sense of a maker at work informs nearly all of the letters in this collection. R. L. Barth, who has edited the selected poems of both Winters and his wife, Janet Lewis, has performed an exemplary service in presenting another aspect of one of the finest poet-critics of the last hundred years.

—David Yezzi

Thomas Mallon In Fact:
Essays on Writers and Writing.
Pantheon, 352 pages, $26.95

Thomas Mallon did not, in fact, set out to become a historical novelist, much less a writer of against-the-grain cultural essays and literary criticism, but he had not counted on the damage that heavy theory would inflict on such vital organs as the head, heart, and ears of academia. As a worker in the vineyard of modern British literature, Mallon, when an assistant professor at Vassar, found himself faced with the daunting task of reviewing a book on Joseph Conrad packed to the gills with jaw-breaking sentences about "ontic vacancy" and "multiplicative inverses." What to do? He could, of course, have given back sentences as good as he got, making it clear that he was one bright, up-and-coming cookie. Instead, Mallon served up the unvarnished truth about this book and dozens of others then pouring out of what were once our best university presses: "no one should write like this, ever." But in arguing that critical prose was "rapidly moving beyond the Latinate and towards the Martian," Mallon now admits that he was, in fact, telling himself to look for another job.

Fortunately, the heady days of high theory largely passed; unfortunately, they were replaced by the litany of race, class, and gender—so much so that, as Mallon rightly points out, they often "seemed to be one angry word, *raceclassgender*." Thus it was that in the fall of 1987, Mallon found himself on his department's hiring committee, plowing his way through dissertation chapters less interested in books than with one version or another of identity politics. Enough was enough, and the next year Mallon called it quits, giving up the comforts of tenure for life as a full-time writer. Since then he has eleven books to his credit, nearly equally divided between fiction and nonfiction.

In Fact is at once a generous collection of pieces he wrote for such magazines as *The American Scholar*, *The New York Times Book*

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Review, and *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, and an ongoing exercise in autobiography. I say the latter because when Mallon writes about contemporaries such as Tom Wolfe, Don DeLillo, and Joan Didion or reassesses the likes of John O'Hara, Sinclair Lewis, and Truman Capote, he reveals not only a good deal about the writers under discussion but also, perhaps, even more about what piques his curiosity and engages his imagination. In reviewing a single book, he often uses the occasion to survey a writer's career and to judge its cultural importance. Mallon also peppers his reviews with delicious one-liners. Writing about Nicholson Baker's "defiantly molecular" prose, Mallon says "Baker doesn't just count the angels on the head of a pin; he does long division with the feathers on their wing tips." The rub—if it be a rub—is that this penchant for the mighty cute can become predictable when read in a collection rather than in individual units.

The same thing is roughly true for those essays out to show off Mallon's considerable skills as a detective. We learn, for example, how he can construct a portrait of his late father by rifling through a shoe box of his canceled checks or how the items found in President Lincoln's pockets on the night he was assassinated can lead to speculations about mythology. What delights us in each case is the sheer skillfulness of Mallon's writing and the apparent ease with which he pulls it off. Still, Mallon would insist that the pulling together, and then the shaping, of facts is what finally matters. Many in the academy argue otherwise, not only suspicious about "facts" but also convinced that a word like "truth" must always be surrounded by sneer quotes and made to answer the following questions: *Whose* truths? And *whose* interests does it serve? To his credit, Mallon will have none of this. That is, in fact, why he left academia in the first place, and why he continues to believe in the value of grounded, verifiable facts. All these many years since writing his doctoral dissertation Mallon now admits that the outer world so rigorously detailed in the fiction of Trollope and Thackeray always meant more to him than the interior excavations of Joyce and Woolf.

A certain amount of repetition comes naturally to the territory of a collection like *In Fact*. We learn more than once, for example, that Ira Magaziner, the person largely responsible for the design of the failed Clinton health plan was also the man who had earlier designed Brown University's infamous New Curriculum, and references to *A Book of One's Own*, Mallon's intriguing study of diarists, keep surfacing every fifth or sixth essay. No matter, say I, for what *In Fact* comes to is a celebration of where attending to specifics rather than to abstractions can take you. Small wonder that Mallon often seems to be a young curmudgeon, exactly the sort of person who will give most tell-all memoirs the drubbing they deserve or who will point out, in a devastating aside, that he "cannot conceive of a phrase in which the adjective condescends to the noun more than 'magical realism.'" We need more writers this smart, this savvy, and most of all, this independent of mind.

—*Sanford Pinsker*

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Notebook

Once upon a time in France

by David Fromkin

It is widely believed, and with reason, that, in the art of cooking, the French are supreme. France gave birth both to the techniques of the haute cuisine—its many ways to slice, peel, combine, heat, and the like—and to its repertoire: its basic sauces and traditional dishes. France produced the seminal theorist of the culture of food and taste, Brillat-Savarin, and the authoritative reference work of the culinary arts: the *Larousse Gastronomique*. The things themselves come from France, but so do the names for them. A consequence is that, as an air controller must understand English, however narrowly specialized the vocabulary, and an opera star must be able to sing in Italian, so a chef, ambitious to excel, ought to become fluent, if not in French, than at least in "Kitchen French."

France's leading position where food is concerned may be explained, at least in part, by the range and excellence of its natural produce. But the French themselves have found a more satisfying explanation of why they are the best at it. As a spokeswoman for Centre Ferrandi, a Paris culinary institute, recently remarked: "*Mais c'est simple. Ici nous avons le goût.*"[1] But France was not always at the top. The omniscient Fernand Braudel tells us that "sophisticated cuisine, typical of all advanced civilizations, and found in China in the fifth century and in the Muslim world from the eleventh or twelfth centuries, did not appear in the West until the fifteenth century, and then in the rich city-states of Italy." Catherine de Médicis, coming from Florence to wed the French king Henry II a century later, is said to have introduced Paris to the culinary wonders for which Italy was then known. Other countries, too, made their contributions. From the sixteenth century on, France was open to food influences "from the four corners of Europe." Braudel seems to concur in the common view that "great French cooking" appeared only in the eighteenth century.

It may be no coincidence that in the same century the French invented the restaurant. The invention is believed to have occurred in the 1760s, though it had its roots in the past. For a long time, Paris shops had sold hot prepared foods to customers and passersby, but without supplying the premises in which to consume them—nor would the shopkeepers supply individual portions. Innkeepers supplied individual portions, but did so in the context of an entire meal in which choice and substitution were not allowed and in which everyone was seated and served at the same time. The new creation—restaurants—provided the benefits of both without the inconveniences of either. Writing in 1825, Brillat-Savarin, a lawyer from French Savoy, argued on behalf of *restaurateurs* that the "encouragement of this

1 Quoted in Amy Trubek's *Haute Cuisine: How The French Invented the Culinary Profession* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 200 pages, $24.95).

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new profession, which spread from France all over Europe, is extremely advantageous to everyone and of great scientific importance."

Thus, the restaurants that the European world initially encountered were exclusively French in cuisine and character. Hence, perhaps, the historical explanation of why it was stamped on the world's consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that high cuisine is by nature French. The rise of the Paris restaurants paralleled the rise of France's reputation as the home of great food.

Restaurants made it possible for the first time for the many, who had no personal chef of their own, to enjoy the excellent cooking hitherto available only to the few. The quality and quantity of French restaurants seems to have taken a giant leap forward in the years beginning with 1789, as the French Revolution destroyed aristocratic households, throwing out of work the best chefs in the kingdom. They opened up restaurants to support themselves. There were fewer than fifty Paris restaurants in 1789; in 1820 there were nearly three-thousand. In theory at least, chefs now were serving the public the sort of food they formerly had served to the aristocracy.

But it could not be entirely so. That restaurant food has to be different became apparent with innovations introduced by the chef, restaurateur, and hôtelier Auguste Escoffier (1846–1935) who worked closely with César Ritz. Escoffier brought a division of labor into the restaurant kitchen—an assembly line of sorts—in which each member of the cooking staff has an assigned function, so that each dish prepared is the product of many hands—and can be produced swiftly.

According to the historian Theodore Zeldin, in volume two of his *France 1848–1945*, Escoffier

> established principles of teamwork, so that whereas previously an order for "deux oeufs sur le plat Meyerbeer" would take a cook fifteen minutes to prepare, now the eggs were cooked by the *entremettier*, the kidney was grilled by the *rôtisseur* and the truffle sauce prepared by the *saucier*: the order thus could be fulfilled in a few minutes.

It was in Escoffier's time that it became respectable even for women to frequent restaurants. But amongst a minority a prejudice against dining in public persisted. Some decades ago, I stayed for a week at a château in the Médoc, in the southwest of France. I wanted to repay my host's hospitality, so I invited him to dine at the best restaurant in the region. He declined, gently, with a benign smile. Not wanting to hurt my feelings, he left it to a friend—later—to explain that it was a matter of privacy. He used his own bathroom, rather than the public lavatories in town along with the general populace. Similarly, he did not eat meals in a room filled with strangers engaged in the same activity. He dined only in his own home—his château—amongst friends and family, or in the château of a friend.

Zeldin tells us that "France's international renown as the home of good food was acquired only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and what was understood by French cooking then was not the same as what it came to mean in the twentieth century." The restaurants, with their fine and rich foods, were confined in those days mostly to Paris, Lyon (center of delicious "home" cooking), and other large cities. They catered to the well-off: the middle classes and professionals. The rest of the peasantry of rural areas ate poorly. In the nineteenth century (Zeldin tells us), cooking in the French countryside was done largely in cauldrons hanging in the fireplace, and the food consisted of vegetables and old bread boiled slowly. Soup, porridge, and bread were the staples of diet. "Peasant bread," Zeldin claims, "as it is now esteemed, is a recent invention, not a traditional food; the old bread was seldom wholesome or pure."

Restaurants in Paris and the gastronomic

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capital of Lyon continued their glorious career into modern times; what changed fundamentally in the first half of the twentieth century was the flourishing of the French countryside. It came with the automobile age, and was accompanied by the appearance in 1900 of the first compact *Guide Michelin*. (Purchasers of the Michelin *Guide Rouge* in 2000 were given replicas of the 1900 edition.) Michelin, a French tire company, provided information in its guidebook about towns all over France in an effort to encourage car trips. The development of high quality in country inns and restaurants was rewarded by ratings in the Michelin guidebook and the other guidebooks that sprang up to rival it.

The fashionable folk, Zeldin tells us, "who indulged in the new amusement of motoring and who therefore gave the provincial hotel and restaurant trade a vastly increased clientele," created something of a myth. "Regional cooking took on a new importance. . . . The impression the gastronomes spread was that there was a vast variety of remarkable dishes to be found all over France like a neglected treasure."

In retrospect it seems evident that conditions were right for the development of the countryside. Granted that the centralized structure of the French food distribution system assumed that the best local produce would be sent to the wholesome markets of Les Halles in Paris, there now was a strong incentive for country chefs on the spot to keep the best back for themselves so as to be able to serve their clients produce fresher than anywhere else. Rents, wages, and overhead of all sorts would be much lower than in Paris. All costs and all energies could be concentrated on creating and serving the best food in the world—made possible by the discovery that in one category after another, French produce is either the best or close to it. The availability of affordable labor enabled chefs to serve fresh hand-churned butter and home-baked bread—and to provide enough waiters to ensure proper service.

At the highest end of the economic scale, a certain structure began to impose itself in the wake of the First World War. It was oriented towards the south of France. To the British, who always had patronized the Riviera in the winter, were added the Americans, led by the Gerald Murphys and the Scott Fitzgeralds, who made it glamorous in the summer. To get there, they disembarked from ocean liners and channel steamers or set out from Paris hotels, and settled in the backs of their limousines as their chauffeurs drove them to the Mediterranean coast, with stops en route for meals and to spend the night.

Success awaited the establishments that became the standard stops along the way. On this golden highway, the young chef Fernand Point, when both he and the century were in their mid-twenties, established supremacy. His restaurant was at Vienne, a small town south of Lyon, on the Rhone river road to Provence. A Roman structure close by gave him the name of his restaurant: the "Pyramide." There, until his death in early 1955, he presided over the leading restaurant in the world and was acknowledged to be the world's greatest chef.

Midway on the highway from Paris to Point's restaurant in Vienne falls Saulieu, in Burgundy. There, in 1932, Alexandre Dumaine—"Alexander the Great"—opened the Hôtel de la Côte d'Or and earned a reputation as second (if at all) only to Point.

André Pic, of Valence, on the other side of Vienne, briefly (1936–1950) formed a third to Point and Dumaine. Their establishments were recognized as the three centers of French cooking in the countryside during the several decades when French cooking in the countryside was known to be the best in the world.

This was where America came in. This was the scene when our compatriots entered upon it.

The reprinting of two books of essays by Joseph Wechsberg (1907–1983) on the arts of living serves as a reminder of how recently Americans were introduced to French

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culinary culture.[2] Many of Wechsberg's pieces, a number of which were written for the *New Yorker*, appeared in the decades immediately following the end of the Second World War. These were the years in which mass tourism was born. The dollar was strong. Europe had not yet fully recovered from the war's devastation. American tourists could easily afford the best the Old World had to offer. All that tourists asked was to be told what the best was—and how to get it.

Wechsberg was a survivor: a man who knew his way around. He was born in Moravia in the dying years of the Habsburg empire. His homeland changed hands several times. His family owned a bank, but it collapsed. He obtained a law diploma, but did not practice. He made his living as a violinist until journalism called. In his periodical pieces, he often was a memoirist of his life's ups and downs: the ups frequently had to do with the pleasures of the table. He was knowledgeable in these matters and fell into the role of instructor for Americans learning what Europe still had to offer. Parallel to Julia Child and the others who set out to teach us how to cook like the French, Wechsberg, and such colleagues as Ludwig Bemelmans—another refugee from the Habsburg decline who wrote for *The New Yorker*—taught Americans to *eat* like the French.

In a way, Wechsberg and Bemelmans were doing much the same thing as a generation of British novelists whose subject was Britons in the Mediterranean. Taking their lead from Norman Douglas in *South Wind* (1917), these were escapists who told and retold the story of inhibited Englishmen learning to indulge in sense pleasures in the sunny southlands of the Italian Mediterranean. The implicit message of Wechsberg and Bemelmans to Puritan America was that hedonism was a good thing.

Bemelmans, who also was an artist, novelist, and restaurant owner, wrote with more humor and charm. The trencherman A. J. Liebling—he, too, writing for *The New Yorker*—wrote what is probably the most seriously good book about French eating in the English language: *Between Meals*. As you read it, it will make you hungry. (Liebling was inspired to write it by the publication of Waverly Root's *The Food of France*, the bible of regional French cuisine.) These are books with qualities to which Wechsberg did not aspire. They were intended for the experienced; he wrote for beginners.

Nor did Wechsberg engage in investigative reporting, as did George Orwell, whose experiences in restaurant and hotel kitchens resulted in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, an exposé that can put you off dining out for good. Wechsberg accepted the house hand-out uncritically. Thus of the Tour d'Argent, a Paris restaurant that traces its origins to 1582, Wechsberg, noting that it was crowded in early days as well as today, tells us that "A cavalier who had neglected to make his reservation would pull up his horse, walk in, challenge one of the guests to a duel, kill him with sword or lance, and take his place." In the words of the Duke of Wellington, "If you believe that, you'll believe anything." But, perhaps, he did not mean for us to believe it.

Wechsberg had a firm grasp on what he wanted to tell his readers. First, he wanted them to know that French cuisine was unique and supreme, and that its exemplars were Point of Vienne and Dumaine of Saulieu.

"Last year at Point's I had the best lunch I've had since Escoffier left the Ritz." An old man told that to Wechsberg, and it inspired him (he said) to find out for himself. The restaurant was physically beautiful. In those days it had an open garden; and if in early summer you chose to lunch or dine there, despite the inconvenience of falling leaves

2 *Trifles Make Perfection: The Selected Essays of Joseph Wechsberg*, edited by David Morowitz; David R. Godine, 320 pages, $24.95. *Blue Trout and Black Truffles: The Peregrinations of an Epicure*, by Joseph Wechsberg; Academy Chicago, 288 pages, $16. See also the out-of-print *Dining at the Pavillon* (1962).

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and the occasional insect, you could sense the southern softness in the air.

Point was a large presence and had an enormous thirst for champagne: it is still hard to believe that he consumed as much of it as people said. He was an outstanding showman for his restaurant, and evidently a first-rate organizer, able and willing to delegate. His students—Paul Bocuse and at least a half-dozen others—became the leading chefs of the next generation.

Dumaine in his simple country inn in Saulieu was much different. He was always in his kitchen. With a handful or less of assistants, he cooked everything himself. An announcement on the wall of the reception room encouraged the client to order in advance, and listed dozens of mouth-watering dishes that he could prepare to order—personally. One evening a small group of us lingered over a post-dinner cognac. Mme. Dumaine asked us to go to our rooms. She said that at night her husband locked up the outer doors himself—it was, after all, his house—and he could not do so until we were in bed. Dumaine was a loner. He left no disciples, even though he was admired by François Minot, the immensely talented and highly intelligent chef who bought the Côte d'Or when Dumaine retired.

Like other chefs, Dumaine was particularly known for certain dishes. But he focused on the menu as a whole, seeing it as similar to a work of music in which each element played a role. Once I overheard him proudly describing to a colleague the birthday dinner that he had created for me the night before. It was summertime, and the heat was intense. Lightness was called for. He had served me and my friends a perfect and unadorned melon; a poached trout with herbs; a steamed *poularde de Bresse*, the best chicken in the world; and a dry, light nut cake with a splendid champagne. It was purity itself. And Dumaine had conceived of it as a whole.

With their many differences, Dumaine and Point between them defined the heights of French cuisine in the first half of the twentieth century: it's a point Wechsberg made repeatedly, and he was right. There is one other such point that he made, and it is illustrated in the course of the 1949 wine auctions at the medieval charity hospital, the *Hospices*, in the Burgundy wine center of Beaune. These annual auctions of wines in barrels—the year's production from vineyards donated by benefactors over the course of centuries, and now owned by the Hospice—tend to set price levels for the year's crop. Hospices de Beaune wines enjoy especial prestige. In 1949 the two great French chefs, Point and Dumaine, joined forces to bid on the Beaune first growths known as the Cuvée des Dames Hospitalières. They invited Henri Soulé, owner of the Pavillon restaurant in New York City, to join them and form a third—of course Soulé accepted. Soulé was a maître d'hôtel, not a chef; and, though French, he lived and worked in the United States. Point and Dumaine had honored him.

Wechsberg saw the symbolism of it. It meant that the United States was being recognized; that at least one restaurant in the new world was being placed on some sort of plane of equality with the two greatest restaurants in France. And indeed Soulé, one-time manager of the French *pavillon* at the 1939 New York World's Fair, did play the role of a bridge between the two countries. After years of training under Soulé, his staff members spread throughout Manhattan to open restaurants of their own in the 1950s and afterwards.

Today Wechsberg's writings on French cuisine exert a period charm. The world about which he wrote and the world for which he wrote have disappeared long since. In the 1950s, France (outside of Paris) was an essentially agricultural country, peasant and traditional in character, with strong and longstanding local cultures. In 2001 it is an industrial nation with a fast-disappearing countryside. Its managerial class is, to a significant extent, weight-conscious and abstemious. Since the 1950s, two courses have disappeared from the standard

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French meal. No longer is there a fish course between the first course and the main course of meat or fowl. Nor, in many restaurants and households, is there a cheese course between main course and dessert: a choice is sometimes given, cheese *or* dessert.

It is true that with wealth and tourism, restaurants of quality continue to proliferate in France. In 2001, the Michelin guide awards twice as many three-star ratings as it did half-a-century ago. But a large proportion of them startle rather than please; blown to success by the winds of fashion, they offer exotic, rare, or hitherto unknown produce and strange new combinations. Sky-high rents and labor and social costs (which in France come with the labor costs) compel restaurants to charge exorbitant prices, which in turn force them to serve a cuisine that seems to justify such prices—for example, by employing foie gras, truffles, and other ingredients known to be expensive in as many recipes as possible.

The reverse was true in Dumaine's Côte d'Or. He made every effort to keep prices down. He wanted his customers to be happy with the food, but also with the bill presented at the end of it. Time and again, his wife would urge me to forego a high-priced wine and order instead a simple, inexpensive Fleurie or Morgon Côte du Py which she assured me would be every bit as good with the food.

At the Pyramide in Vienne I once arrived at noon and rose from the table at 5:30 PM. At the Côte d'Or in Salieu I routinely was seated for dinner at 8:00 PM and finished my cognac not long before midnight. Nowadays restaurants cannot afford to let customers linger over their meals. Economic pressures beget time pressures.

Wechsberg's essays evoke the pleasures of a vanished world: a simpler and less sophisticated world, so far as food and drink are concerned, in which Americans, not yet the knowing folk that we have become, enjoyed the excitement of experiencing Europe's offerings for the first time. Today, as we are hustled out of restaurants aiming to achieve three seatings a night, Wechsberg's writings can serve to remind us that though the twenty-first century gained us a new thrill —speed—it also lost is an old pleasure: leisure.

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Letters

Umberto Saba

To the Editors:

In the often thankless work of translating poetry, the translator is usually content with any attention that might be paid to his labors. Thus I suppose I should, and do, prefer Eric Ormsby's lengthy, mixed review of my translations of Umberto Saba's *Songbook: Selected Poems* and *History and Chronicle of the Songbook* (December 2000), with its partial praise, to the general indifference with which the work has been received. All the same, because Professor Ormsby's quibbles with my renditions seem to me informed by little more than a captious pedantry and because he goes to such length to make points that, when not simply wrong, are merely differences of opinion and taste, I feel compelled to defend my decisions and point out some of the flaws in his reasoning.

Professor Ormsby appears to belong to that school of armchair translators who too often succumb to the illusion that not only are their sight translations of the original preferable to the painstakingly gestated solutions presented on the page, but that such immediate and literal renderings never occurred to the translator. Thus we are told, at the start of the review, that the following tercet:

> *Esistere da tanti anni mi sembra,*
> *che forse con Abramo ho trasmigrato.*
> *Forse fui Faust, e Margherita ho amato.*

would somehow be better, and truer to the original and all its effects, in the reviewer's following version (the last two lines are his):

> I feel I've been alive so many years,
> Maybe with Abraham I migrated,
> Maybe I was Faust and loved Margarete.

than in my rendition:

> I feel I've been alive so many years,
> I may well have gone forth with Abraham,
> I may have been Faust, and loved Margarete.

Now given that Saba, here and often (though not always), writes in an unaffected, almost spoken voice set in verse, and that, in the translation of such poetry, idiomatic naturalness and clarity are of paramount importance, is it really so obvious that the reviewer's lines are more effective as verse, and more logical as English, than my rendition? In harping on the loss of the repetition of the word *forse* in the original, Ormsby seems unaware not only that our wonderful English "may" is sometimes the most graceful way to convey its shade of doubt, but also that there are several levels of repetition in my rendering.

Here as elsewhere Ormsby seems to labor under the delusion one can somehow carry over prosodic effects, *tels quels*, from one language and one poetic tradition to another, instead of making allowances for those devices native to the target language. Giving no examples other than the one cited above, he states that "[a]gain and again, Sartarelli overlooks or ignores the small

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but forceful repetitions of such words as *troppo* or *ancora* or *forse* in Saba's lyrics." This criticism is not only superficial and unsubstantiated; it is also misinformed and overlooks the often pleonastic role such words can play, not just in Saba but in the Italian language as a whole, and especially in formal verse. But nowhere is this tenuous understanding of the differences between the two languages—and the manner in which they come into play in translation—more glaring than in Ormsby's claim that I neglect to carry over "characteristic stylistic devices [such as] inversion of word order, which Saba employs often to quite dramatic results." We are told that "such inversions occur regularly throughout the *Songbook* and might have served, along with other distinctly Sabean stylistic tics (refrains, fugal voices, etc.) to shore up the fragility of English versions." Leaving aside the absurd implication that I have somehow suppressed "refrains, fugal voices, etc.," it would appear, incredibly, that Professor Ormsby is unaware that in Italian syntax, word order is far less important to comprehension and clarity than it is in English. Indeed anastrophe occurs regularly not only in Saba's *Canzoniere*, but in all Italian formal (and often even in free) verse, simply because the language can sustain it, especially in the most extreme forms, in a way that English, not even in its most florid, archaic expression, cannot.

But the shaky foundations of Ormsby's argument finally collapse utterly in the illustration he cites to clinch this particular point:

> Thus at the end of "Ashes" . . . Saba wrote: "*Muto/ parto dell'ombre per l'immenso impero*" which Sartarelli translates as "Silent/ I leave for the shadows' vast realm." This is correct but misses the point. Saba's inversion of "*dell'ombre per l'immenso impero*" gives his line a Latinate, a Virgilian, clangor quite missing from the English. Saba here wants to end on a "classical" note as reverberatory and yet marmoreal as an ancient epitaph, hence the alliteration on *m* and the solemnly Augustan diction.

This all sounds rather grand, but it is completely wrong. Oh yes, the diction is quite unusual, even forced, but the lines, as Saba himself says twice in the *History and Chronicle*, are lifted from the libretto of Guarany. Thus they are not at all Virgilian, Augustan, maromoreal, etc. Rather, they are an example of that Romantic, melismatically "poetic" Italian proper to opera librettos, for which there really exists no equivalent in English. The extreme hyberbaton of Saba's sentence here could never be used in our tongue. I will, I think, be forgiven for choosing not to carry this impossible *forzatura* over into my version.

But even as regards carrying over some of the effects of the original, there is, apparently, no pleasing Professor Ormsby, as when, curiously failing to cite the original, he accuses one of my quatrains for the "Sixth Fugue" of lapsing "into almost total unintelligibility,": "I know no sweeter thing/ than love; and yet one shrewder/ than you, more fervent as I, feel as though born to suffer." (*"Io non so più dolce cosa/ dell'amore; ma più scaltro/ ma di te più ardente, è un altro/ che a soffir nato mi sento."*)

Here, perhaps unsuccessfully, though not without great effort, I tried to convey not only the extreme condensation of Saba's ellipsis and the stammering though verse-bound voice, but also the daring slide from third to first person in the verb. Did Ormsby find the Italian so crystal clear? The reviewer's offhandedly harsh, dismissive language in this instance, especially in absence of the original, is careless and insulting.

Finally, to pack a review of a translation with suggestions of x instead of y for z, especially when the texts are free of egregious semantic error (Ormsby has presented no such instance, though I'll admit he missed a couple), is to engage in subjective, schoolboyish one-upmanship. It is very easy, when reading a published translation, to poke holes and ask questions. I do it all the time; the options are endless. It is another matter to pass such superficial impressions off as serious reading and then put them into print. In our noisy culture it is hard enough to hear poetry as it is; let's not further muffle it with the din of feathers puffing.

Stephen Sartarelli
Hudson, N.Y.

Eric Ormsby replies

Let me state in reply to Stephen Sartarelli that I agree completely with his main point: translation

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is a thankless task, and it is all too easy to snipe from the sidelines. That was not my intention, however, in my review of his translations of Umberto Saba (which, in fact, I praised enthusiastically when I felt they worked). Still, isn't a close consideration of his work itself a tribute? In my review, my first objective was to make clear how intensely difficult, if not impossible, *any* translation of Saba must be, and I did this in order to provide a context for assessing Mr. Sartarelli's own versions.

With reference to his specific comments, I hasten to assure Mr. Sartarelli that I was not trying to improvise better *verse* translations than his own, in the few excerpts I included, but to give the reader without Italian some more literal sense of the original. It still seems true to me that Saba routinely depends upon the repetition of common and inconspicuous words like *forse* in many of his poems and that this enhances their song-like quality. Yes, "may" does "convey its shade of doubt," but it strikes me as the weaker choice. In any case, I did not accuse Mr. Sartarelli of "suppressing" anything; I simply suggested that there might be other, and more effective, ways of translating Saba.

Mr. Sartarelli's indignant harangue on the subject of Italian syntax is more "captiously pedantic" than anything I wrote. It doesn't matter from whom Saba took the line "*Muto/ parto dell'ombre per l'immenso impero*," for the point I was trying to make was that its structure required a different response from the translator. And, I'm sorry, but it does have a Virgilian feel (e.g., *Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*), largely because of the inversion *dell'ombre per l'immenso impero*. Mr. Sartarelli would have us believe that because Italian syntax is freer in its word order than English, Saba did not intend this effect. That is possible but I doubt it. I leave it to the reader to judge.

As to Mr. Sartarelli's final point, I did toy with including the Italian text of the stanza which I found "unintelligible" in his translation but decided against it. Does it really excuse Mr. Sartarelli's incoherence that the poet himself was even more so? Surely the reader has a right to expect a note or comment on such a stanza. The effect in any case, in both original and translation, is of careless utterance and not of a "stammering though verse-bound voice," whatever that might be. The stanza is perfectly fluid and ungrammatical at once, and it looks like a slip, not a deliberate effect.

I would be unhappy to think that my criticisms, which I understood to be the responsibility of a reviewer to make, might have obscured Mr. Sartarelli's achievement which I admire and sought to acknowledge. His good translations are really good, the best we have of this elusive poet, and the unevenness of some of the others does not impair the whole.

Correction

There was an error in our review of *Gödel: A Life of Logic*, by John L. Casti and Werner DePauli (December 2000). On page 77, in the sentence "If complete, it would contain an infinity of true statements that could not be proved by the system's axioms," the word "complete" is an inadvertant misprint for "consistent."

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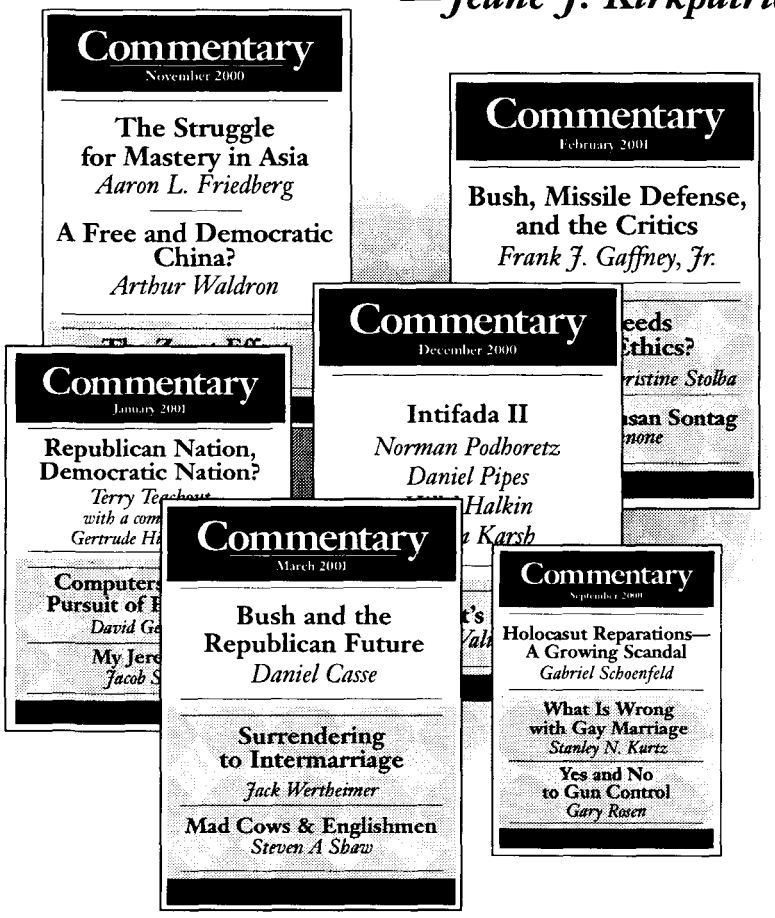

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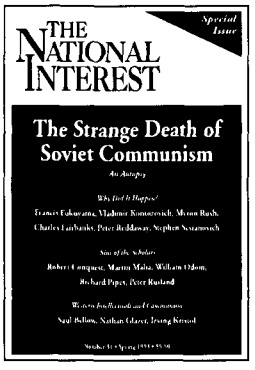

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Scholar Viewing Misty River Valley
Fan painting, ink and color on silk
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